

THE NIGERIAN WOMAN: A FORCE TO BE RECKONED WITH

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Abstract: This paper examines the role of women in the novels of Chinua Achebe, with a focus on *Anthills of the Savannah*. The paper argues that Achebe's portrayal of women is complex and nuanced, and that he explores the different ways in which women can participate in public affairs. The paper also discusses the challenges that women face in post-colonial African societies, and how Achebe's novels offer a glimpse of the possibilities for women's empowerment.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, women, role of women, public affairs, post-colonial Africa

1. The novel as a fitting sequel to the previous ones a) Women in Traditional roles

Anthills is said to be different from the previous novels because, for the first time, Achebe devotes a lot of space to articulate his views on the role women should play in public affairs of post-colonial African states (Poysa: 2011; Uzoecha Nwagbara: 2009; 2010; Ngozi & Obiageli: 2018; Rumana Sidique: 2017; Rajesh: 2014; et al). For instance, Ezinma (*Things Fall Apart*) is a potential firebrand girl the father sees replacing, in his mind, the soft-kneed son, Nwoye, he has dismissed from his mind and from heirship; but she is still the traditional girl of good manners, a potential fetcher of good bride-price because every male would be seeking out this "good mother" image to marry. Clara (*No Longer at Ease*) is a London Been-To, a well educated nurse, a symbol of the "new girl" of the eve of independence, a potential wife to any „Big Man“ of the New Nigeria, but she has been cast into an ambivalent role as an Osu (unmarriageable bride of some spirit god); so, she carries the remains of fast receding past practices of magic, idol worship and superstitions. Yet, as an independent educated girl, her new freedom in Lagos shows a girl of high class culinary and city glamour tastes; she may not marry Obi who wants a glamour girl to show off, to show he, too, is a Been-To, but she has independence to flirt with any high class Chris, John, and Tom, the „Coming Men“ of an emerging high class. Then the hordes of women singers, dancers and adorers of The Hon M.A. Chief Nanga (*A Man of the People*) typify the blind electorate, the political dung flies following blood spoor for political meals.

His wife, though said to be a foreign educated graduate, is no better than these dancers: she will support the husband, but when she comes to know of his sexual dealings with a youthful Edna he intends to marry, she switches allegiance and supports Odili, his opponent soon to turn the new „Man of the People“. She turns a typical African house wife fighting for survival of her marriage and thin relevance in the man's clan. Instead it is Eunice the lawyer, the fiancé of Max (old schoolmate of Odili), who displays some exceptional mettle in her: she has founded the Common People's Convention to expose and fight Chief Nanga's excessive practice of corruption. But when her husband Max is shot by a member of a rival party, this triggers off the typical avenging political

animal in Eunice: at a most opportune moment, she surreptitiously whips a pistol out of her bag and shoots Chief Koko dead (AMP: 159160). But, this is not the modern political woman society would wish to be the new exemplary woman. Hers is an individualistic cause because what she does is part and parcel of the lawlessness, corruption, political opportunism and total lack of direction characteristic of characters in this text.

b) Contrast in Anthills

It is in Anthills that Achebe takes a totally different direction: the focus goes to a woman of exceptional qualities. First of all, she is a beauty to admire; then, we are told she is a graduate with a First Class degree in English from some London university; she is a Senior Civil Servant in the Kangan Government, and a woman feared even by the Head of State who is dying to have sex with her but deep down he knows she despises him and may never succeed in his attempts (which he does and totally fails). This is because she is a fearless intellectual who will not countenance even her beloved boyfriend's (Chris') feeble excuses of supporting tyranny as Commissioner for Information. This is a woman nauseated by the fickleness of even opportunistic women such as the Negro journalist (Miss Cranford of the American United Press) hankering for „sex fame“ with a glamorous African Head of State. Dealing with this Cranford, Beatrice displays her typical impatience and irritation with intellectuals, as in the case of even Ikem, failing to properly articulate precisely the role of women in society, especially in an African society. Her altruism is depicted in her disdain for reckless ambition, for she does not even hold any intention to marry. She only wants to do her job well and enjoy life as a happy, patriotic citizen.

It is this last quality that, perhaps, may be questioned: she keeps a boyfriend she really dotes on, but will not countenance marriage, revolted in the past by the father's religious hypocrisy and constant cruel beating of her mother; she hates this male chauvinism and entrenched belief in the so-called supremacy of patriarchy. This is a feared quality many African men especially hate in women who have embraced the socialist feminism, yet, facts on the ground show Africa is getting quite a following in believers of this ism: no marriage but a woman can enjoy her freedom of expression and association, enjoy sexual relationship and even get children but stay a single patriotic mother, keep her well paid job, and then cater to herself and children if she is a single mother.

But this is not the key issue Achebe wishes us to explore: his intention in Anthills is a challenge to a reexamination of the role we all, collectively (without blind orthodoxies and crammed idealistic theories) want this symbolic woman to play in a new Africa, and how African literature should articulate this (AOS: 98-100).

2. Evils plaguing Kangan a) Lack of self-identity and failure at self-identification at leadership level: Backboneless leaders in charge of a nation

One of the evils plaguing Kangan is the lack of identity in leaders who have failed to identify themselves with the citizens. They do not seem to understand they are imprisoned in the cosmetic trappings of a civilization left by colonialists: a foreign-based language and education, foreign-based religions, and Western-based social-economic means of livelihood founded on who has money to enter the class of the Haves; then the so-called democracy-based politics that, for Kangan (Nigeria), has turned into a circus of military dictatorships right after the first peoplepresident, et c. This is the mesh many scholars have found crippling any leadership attempt at change and stability of post-colonial African states and their people (Ashcroft et al: 2003; Pallavi Bhardwaj: 2015; Olufunwa: 2002; Anda, Rabin: 2014; Igwe, M.E: 2015; Hamadi, Lufti: 2012; et al). Narrator Beatrice summarizes

Chris's naïve way of looking at this entrapment (while replying to Ikem's accusation of Kangan government's inability to give citizens basic necessities)

(Chris) side-stepped the issue completely to produce one of those beautiful historical vignettes... Nations, he said, were fostered as much by structures as by laws and revolutions. These structures... are the pride of their nations. But everyone forgets that they were not erected by democratically elected Prime Ministers but very frequently by rather unattractive bloodthirsty medieval tyrants. The Cathedrals of Europe, the Taj Mahal of India, the pyramids of Egypt and the stone towers of Zimbabwe were all raised on the backs of serfs, starving peasants and slaves. Our present rulers in Africa are in every sense late-flowering medieval monarchs, even the Marxists among them.... (Anthills: 74). But, for Achebe, ordinary citizens are not the problem; not even the very many naïve postcolonial foreign-oriented types; the blame lies with the corrupt leadership and their Westernized mentality. This is a key theme of *The Anthills* expanded in *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1990), a scathing attack on Nigeria's military dictatorships since the overthrow of an only and only civilian president.

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land or climate or water or air or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership. (1990: 118).

Chris gives us critical hints that show Sam, the President, as a typical example of that class of alienated leaders stuck in a colonial legacy. We are told Sam will not countenance opposition, the very method the colonialists used to subjugate the colonized. For instance, right at the start of the novel, we watch Sam's cabinet sitting to apparently discuss what should be national development issues. Instead the meeting disintegrates into a typical dictator's haranguing of his stooges. We hear the curt and authoritative voice of His Excellency utter shocking revelations about himself, the way he runs state affairs and his distorted sense of duty: "You're wasting everybody's time, Mr Commissioner for Information. I will not go to Abazon. Finish! **Kabisa!** ... The matter is closed... How many times, for God's sake, am I expected to repeat it?" (Anthills: 1). Chris, his trusted minister of Information/Propaganda answers, typically – "I am sorry, Your Excellency. But I have no difficulty swallowing and digesting your rulings." The scene presents us, therefore, a cowed, subservient, childlike cabinet, too cautious to brush against Sam's lion power. The Attorney General, that supposedly pillar of good laws and human rights, is said to be "perched on the edge of his chair" (AOS: 22), with every official drowning in parochialism, fawning on the Master, competing to show obedience, subservience. Ikem, referring especially to Chris, mockingly summarizes this typical backboneless leadership thus - "Following a leader who follows his leader would be quite a circus". (Idem: 54).

b) Flamboyant lifestyle

In another discussion of these leaders' social and sex life, Ikem, Dr Kent (Mad Medico), Beatrice and Elewa, entertain us with the type of everyday pastimes that take up what should be nation-building thinking. We are given leaders lusting after luxuries, following high class British standards. We first learn of the randy life of His Excellency while abroad at some military Academy, and continues the pastime when back home as President: he is not even ashamed to call himself an accomplished polygamist. His expensive way of living is further betrayed

by his residences – a renovated Presidential Palace and then the Guest House itself at an artificially constructed Abichi Lake; these are sprawling beauties maintained at a scandalously high cost, splendor for its own sake so he can hold his expensive parties, dances and high-class receptions and then dates from a gleaming ambience. Typical extravagance is displayed at the party-dance he organizes specifically to trap Beatrice into a relationship. It is a moment eloquent enough to show us a President dandy: imported dishes and drinks and some sparingly local choices. Typical of his outspokenness, Ikem has already underscored this type of high class living with his remark to Mad Medico, vis-à-vis conditioned expensive living of Kangan leadership and the class of intellectuals symbolized in Gin-drinking: “We were enslaved originally by Gordon’s Dry Gin. All gestures of resistance are now too late and too empty. Gin it shall be forever and ever. Amen.” (AOS: 54). In Fanon’s analysis, too, (1980: 36), the colonialist bourgeoisie mentality has seeped deeply into these politicians and intellectuals; the germs of individualism and self-aggrandizement are too deeply ingrained in them.

Such leaders, therefore, become too preoccupied with selves to sermon courage to note the plight of those they lead; no wonder Sam won’t hear of any complaints from Abazon, a hated Province of citizens who refused to vote **Yes** to approve his megalomania: wishing to be life president. One notices how Achebe slots into Sam’s speech a notoriously well-known crude swear-word : **Kabisa!** (borrowed from the notorious Ugandan dictator, Idi Amin); a word always connoting ominous finality to every decision Idi Amin took. Connotations from this allusion are too chilling to miss: a no-nonsense leader, decisively murderous ... a leader who hardly exercised any caution and always got done what he wanted. This is the satirized typical product of a colonial Military Academy Rodney (1983) writes about –

Like their civilian counterparts, the future police and military elite (after independence) were judged by the colonizers to have the requisite qualities of colonial cadres – fit to be part of the ruling class of neo-colonial Africa (and hence training some of these) at the metropolitan higher institutions of scientific violence... Sandhurst Military Academy and Hendon Police... (These) became the cream of military elite, corresponding to those African civilians who went to university either in Africa or abroad. This is how Anthills gives us another face of Soyinka’s interpreters in *The Interpreters*. Sam, Chris, Ikem, the Basra Lottery Club and Basra University members Ikem addresses and many others like them in Kangan, as in *The Interpreters*, suffer from a common colonial fault: alienation. Mamdani (1983: 8) puts it thus –

The (colonial) education system served the ends of the British colonial policy: ... The intelligentsia produced by government and mission schools were faithful admirers and executors of the British system; they were hardly the type of people needed as agents of economic growth in (a postcolonial) country. A satellite economy cannot but breed a satellite mentality.

c) Lack of self-identity and a sense of responsibility among modern intellectuals, another face of parasitism in society

The narrative of *Anthills* further gives Ikem „s intellectual probing a chance to satirize the hollowness of the intellectuals at the Basra Lotery Club and, especially at the Basra University where Professors, lecturers and their students hungrily gather to listen to Ikem. These are crucial sources of Kangan leadership, from the highest to the lowest levels of cadreship, of responsibility to the people. Yet, their naivety, individualism and myopic

conception of disparities and injustices in their society is shocking. Hardly anyone seems to grasp the symbolic significance of Ikem's story of „The Tortoise and the Leopard“, a story he attributes to his Abazoni Chief, now languishing in the Basra Maximum Security Prison (Anthills: 153). None in this audience thinks in a truly committed way of this leopard power in relation to not only this imprisonment but its recurrence in the politics of Kangan; nor do they understand the allusion and implicature of a devastating motif: corrupt power ravaging with impunity. This is because one's political weight entitles him to monopolize all the means of production and livelihood, to ravage other people's (Abazon's) opportunities to good health and secure existence, and to ruthlessly dispose of any opposition in his way, just like a wild beast/leopard does to defenseless game in the same park. Ironically, Ikem's every utterance is received with raucous laughter and thunderous clapping to demonstrate how, from the space of their post-colonial grounding (university campuses, clubs and pastimes of the elite, in posh government houses, in hotels and government paid comforts at campuses, etc), these intellectuals remain idealists hankering after those opportunities enjoyed by Sam and his upper class. These intellectuals, undoubtedly, are part of the class of political and business moguls. In such a world, these so-called intellectuals hardly think of the ordinary, defenseless people, the crawling tortoises. Yet, these are the downtrodden they see every day, people who cater to the multiple needs of the privileged in one way or another: the hassled taxi-drivers and market women; prostitutes crawling around the moneyed in the city and the haunts of plenty such as the Harmony Hotel ; the servants of the Agatha type toiling at the Presidential Palace and other top civil servants' bungalows; the city cleaners suffering cleaning the squalor of Basra slums and other dirty places where the rich dispose of their dirt for the city scum to clean; the lowly Elewas to answer to the sexual urges of the Ikems and to the hassle required as shop attendants, daily eying the heart-wounding riches they will never own; the low-rank policemen and soldiers harassing drivers and other human prey for a few coins to survive their own deprivations, et c. This is why it is intriguing Ikem's intellectual audience shuts up, laughter dead, when challenged: among you here, who is a peasant? Who of you can identify himself with peasantry you are talking about, pretending to identify with? (AOS: 156-57). They have instead been demanding to have answers to such basic questions, questions that touch, demand answers to common people's daily demands for livelihood, survival; questions an Elewa or any market woman would answer with the ease of an economist. Achebe, therefore, gives us a typical deAfricanized audience: rootless intellectuals, bookworms and theorists that will spew out crammed pronouncements from Marxism, theories of good governance, and causes of bad governance, but they can hardly see how these relate to themselves, their society, and their people.

Ikem does not mince his words and he tells them, „I see a lot of elitism here“ (AOS: 157-59), a blinding idealism. These are the people who need massive decolonizing with decongesting pedagogies that reach deep in the minds to touch selves and consciences, show them as betrayers of their people, of their moral responsibility even to themselves as thinking beings (Iseke-Barnes: 2007; Tuck & Wayne Yang: 2012; Al Farabi: 2015; et al).

The urgency of such an intervention is because the disease being fought is too deep-rooted to toy with. In Dascal's words (2007: 1-3) – It is a form of „epistemic violence“... taking possession and control of its victims' minds (with effects that are) long-lasting and not easily removable. (This is because) they occur in socio-political situations (through) transmission of mental habits and contents by means of social systems other than the colonial

structure. For example via the family, traditions, cultural practices, religion, science, language, fashion, ideology, political regimentation, the media, education, et c.

In other words, Dascal incriminates the post-colonial privileged classes as always „thinking white“: the persistent return of the minds to those attractions, wishes, possessions and modes of reasoning that are alien to the pre-colonial *modus Vivendi, modus operandi*. This is the mentality that breeds a constant conscious or even unconscious comparison, a compulsive pull of minds away from what is often unthinkingly derided as a „primitive“ past. These are the kind of leaders schools, colleges and universities are producing: “Educated hybrids and dislocated” products (Klohinlwene Kone“: 2016); personalities Postcolonial narratives have given other various satirical epithets such as „Returnees and Been-To“s, Subverted Minds, Prodigal Sons of Africa, Renegades and Apostates, Men of the People, The Rootless, etc (Samba Diop: 2012; Olufunwa, H. : 2004; Pal, Virender: 2018; Zapata, V.J.: 1993; Sakshi, 2013; et c.). It is their individualism, hunger for power, corruption and self-aggrandizement that have impoverished Kangan, especially, Abazon Province. Achebe, therefore, uses the Chief of Abazon to compliment Ikem“s speeches: the use of a „Story“ (historiography) to explain the causes and effects of the symbolic Abazon drought, and the history of violence and oppression in the whole of Kangan.

d) The Story of perennial deprivation among the masses.

Achebe does not want us to be like these pseudo-intellectuals of the Basra Lottery Club and Basra University believing in the usual scapegoats, the external factors, as causes of African poverty and degradation: imperialists and capitalists with their massive investments in our countries (AOS: 158). Achebe (Ikem) gives this blind audience examples of their own ridiculous, constantly practiced methods of fraud to ponder, *vis-à-vis* their leopard greedamong-sheep story: the fraudulent civil servants spouting clichés of theories of good development, yet busy exploiting the poor through false claims; the illegal electricity connections and billing and theft of meters and other petty and serious crimes; the burning down of entire Accounts and Audit Departments to cover fraud and avoid accountability; the newly graduated students burning down a new maternity ward in a remote area because they don“t want to be posted there (they prefer cities where quick money can be fraudulently got); bribed students involved in tribalism, religious extremism, electoral merchandizing, voter intimidation and even accepting bribes to kidnap political opponents as accomplished politicians do; students forging their way to university admissions using bribes and other underhand methods; students merely parroting clichés from professors as superstitious patients will parrot cures from witchdoctors... (AOS: 159-61) etc.

Earlier on, as Chris undergoes a moral change, after Ikem is abducted and murdered, he tells Beatrice another ironic version of the leopard-tortoise way of sharing existence in Kangan: the story of how the parasites are fattening too fast. It is the symbolic riches of Alhaji Abdul Mahmoud: the richest millionaire in Kangan with eight ocean liners and three private jets, a private jetty and over fifty companies, a bank and a monopoly of government fertilizer imports and of even smuggling; and, above all, a very ruthless leopard that will have no one interfere with his acquisitive appetite and money-empire (Anthills: 117). This is a monstrosity of a human being, a symbol of excessive personified greed precisely because these are some of the causes of crime: robbers prowling the night hunting for victims to gun down and then grab from them something to live on for a day. Achebe, therefore, as a good literary historian and teacher, has seen this materialistic drift since his portrayal of the Obi Okonkwo (No

Longer at Ease). They begin with shy, timid practicing of petty corrupt practices and moral degeneration like the students Ikem addresses. Then they gradually graduate into the sharks of A Man of the People (the Odillis). Sam and his military brass and their Alhajis have completed the cycle of accomplished exploiters. In Freire's words (2000: 58)

In their unrestrained eagerness to possess, the oppressors develop the conviction that it is possible for them to transform everything into objects of their purchasing power; hence their strictly materialistic concept of existence. Money is the measure of all things, and profit the primary goal. For the oppressors, what is worthwhile is to have more – always more – even at the cost of the oppressed having less or having nothing. For them, **to be is to have** and to be the class of the “haves” (Authorial emphasis).

This is how, indeed, Sam and his leeches have changed the Kangan people into “inanimate „things”“, a tendency to sadism, to deter “the drive to search for meaning to life, driving people into restlessness, and killing their creative power, a dehumanizing marginalization and (a sadism which) kills life” (Friere 2000: 60). This is what makes the Abazon Chief gnash his teeth as he narrates the pain of his people. But, even Chris, who is supposed to be making arrangements for this Chief and his delegation to be received and heard, surprisingly does not properly comprehend what pains this delegation. Acquiescence into corrupting power and riches and fear of his boss have crippled any iota of moral scruple he should develop. But soon he learns by the hard way: the loss of Ikem, a friend he has ignored, betrayed, and Beatrice tickles that bit of humanity latent in him; then he resurrects and begins a new journey to selfcleansing, to humanity, to knowing what Abazon symbolizes.

e) Chris' symbolic journey: delving deeper into the history-records of a country's ruining impoverishment

Following him on his symbolic journey, from power to deprivation and death, we keenly follow how Achebe educates Chris through observations and a stunning realization of issues he had never bothered about as Sam's righthand man: the metaphors and extended metaphors and symbols of human deprivation depicted by the human vermin he had constantly ignored now make their presence felt in his conscience in a new, redeeming way. He very keenly first takes note of dehumanizing conditions where he hides in a Basra slum before exile – the extremely harsh conditions of Basra slum dwellers in bee-hive cell tenements where, ironically and surprisingly, Braimoh, one of the poorest of Basra slum dwellers, offers him hiding from the raving anger of a dictator he helped nurture. Achebe makes an ironic comment here: after all, it seems the Braimohs, the poor human rats have more love, humanity in them than found in rich parasites! Then Chris must suffer the stings and bites of bedbugs, fleas and mosquitoes to add to fear and hunger pain. Deprived of sleep, he can now listen to the dance of rats scouring for food particles among dirty rattling pots and cutlery as they also raise floor dust that rises to tickle unused nostrils; he accepts to suffer the rancid smell of urine and sweat from cuddled up kids summoning sleep forcibly, on empty stomachs; he observes the dim lighting of the room and all over the adjoining tenements, which offers more opportunities for vermin to effect successful food hunting and free mixing with these God's bits of wood. Even the stolen moment of love-making to precariously safeguard the tittering morals of the little ones, curled up almost under the parents' bed, does not escape his pensive mind: the little beasts know but won't sneeze, whisper, or move to betray knowledge of grown-ups' moral unease yet begrudged the little innocents for their open practice; etc.

Then Chris's growth into humanity takes us to the larger symbol of the epitome of post-colonial dehumanization, poverty and disillusionment. Fleeing from arrest and a sure death, he seats on a ramshackle bus, but, ironically, this is one of the beauties of transport facilities (Luxurious Bus) Abazon has invented, a cobbled up edifice of metal and glass by some ingenious money-making company. Chris begins to critically examine and appreciate, for instance, the urgency, the need and energy it takes to locally fabricate such contraptions as means of transport for the neglected of Abazon. People's need has forced them to cobble up some form of self-sustenance against neglect by the State. He is soon rudely awakened to the physical (and symbolic) drought of Abazon Province he observes as they snake their way to the North: the scorching sun; the aridity of land and omnipresent, oppressive heat; the hazy atmosphere - a shimmer of heat-sand-dust-cover over the land as if God's natural healthy sun light became a forbidden luxury long ago. Here in Abazon, the sprawling land of red soils, sand and thorny, stunted trees stretch for miles and miles as the eye can see. The lack of infrastructure is symbolized in the rut filled, pot-holed „highway“. And the inhabitants resemble their trees – tiny, stunted, dirty and huddled together in groups along the road, others around their „mud-walled“ houses with a semblance of modernity in form of rusting iron-sheets for roofs. But, as Chris observes the so-called modern-looking hut-rows (Anthills: 206-207) are nothing but “the march-past of dwellings in descending hierarchies (that) continued until modest militias of round thatched huts began to pass slowly across Chris's reviewing stand”: it is a display of dilapidation, decrepit living. And, in what stand as townships along the road, and for travelers' comfort, Chris reveals to us further plight of Abazon people: a typical „dusty and bustling market town“. its welcoming delicacies are advertised in the most poetic, enticing adverts by solicitous earnest pleas of „hotel owners“; they must compete for a little income into the “little huts with grand names competing for customers with colorful signboards backed up with verbal appeals: Goat meat here! Egusi soup here! Bushmeat here! Come here for Rice! Fine fine Pounded Yam!... Very Desent Restorant...” (Anthills: 207). Only to meet a shocking realization: these are „grand hotels“ with no portable water, leave alone for even washing hands before eating. Travelers are in a land that has had no water for two years; dry river beds stare at people.

To make it worse, here, as in the whole country and along roads, we find a key paradox of Sam's dictatorship: the policemen and soldiers propping up the regime share in the deprivation of the masses and so survive on violent extortion at roadblocks. This is the Ilmorog of Ngugi's *Petals of Blood*. A few capitalist parasites in government and trade have sunk their teeth into all avenues of a country's resources.

F) from corrupt leadership and „thinking white“ to ravaging leopards and scorching Sun: the metaphors of state-inspired violence and oppression, the nation as a terrorist

Balogun (2014) argues that a nation constantly torn apart by tribal and state-inspired violence soon turns into a boiling pot of complex violence rightly termed „the nation as a terrorist“ of its citizens. He bases his views on the violent history of a never stable Northern Nigeria from where ethnic violence, the anti-Igboism, erupted in the 60's and since then Nigeria's ethnic conflicts and dissatisfaction with economic and political situation have continued to brew such terrorism. This is decidedly part of mass deprivation we witness in Anthills, ironically fuelled by military leadership. In Anthills, this trend is well brought out by the Chief's story, complimented by Ikem's poem, „Hymn to the Sun“. Ikem has had an urgent order from his boss, Chris, Commission for

Information, to send a photographer to the Presidential Palace to cover His Excellency's meeting with a „good will mission“, delegates coming to beg for alleviation of horrors of a drought after a two-year scorching sun continues to rain more horrors on Abazon. Ikem's mind goes poetic with visions of this ruinous history of this „Sun“ not only over Abazon but above the whole of Kangan. Achebe's narrative then, using Ikem, enters a historical configuration of the havoc this „Sun“ has rained on Nigeria. Reminiscing Ikem reveals, We have been slowly **steamed** into well-done **mutton**...and all the **oafs** on our public payroll tell us we are doing just fine... No... This is **Brigadier Misfortune** of the **Wilting 202 Brigadier** telling you you are NOT fine. No... you will not be fine until you can overthrow the **wild Sun**. Later tonight... you will hear the full text (of weather forecast) from **General Mouth** himself... after the national anthem shall have been played **backwards**. Until then, beloved countrymen, **roast** in peace“. (AOS: 27-28). (Emphasis in bold mine).

The neo-colonial history of things falling apart is captured in military dictatorship symbols of violence and gun-power: the oppressive power of Brigadiers and Generals; the oppressive heat that follows Ikem and intensifies as he drives to the Presidential Palace; the heat attacking drivers (especially taxi drivers) through a crawling traffic jam till Ikem has to drive aggressively against a rude taxi driver trying to edge him out of his line; the whole steaming city is as if placed on a huge, hot cooking fire. Ikem concludes: all these are victims of „the sun. We are parboiled as farmers do their rice to ease the shelling. Thereafter **we** take only five minutes **to cook**“. (AOS: 30).

The personification here is very revealing: excruciating times do twist, churn and tear up lives, physically, psychologically, and spiritually. His mind is on fire as he approaches the Palace, the source of this torture. The composition and content of his „Hymn to the Sun“ that night has been given sufficient foregrounding of violence and oppression. The poem's quasi-supplicatory tone, however, does not detract from the scathing satire on Kangan leadership. Apostrophized to „Great Carrier of Sacrifice to the Almighty: Single Eye of God“, the prayer-like hymn is a lament of the whole nation (AOS: 30-31): the cruel irony-paradox is that what should be a life-giving creation of God turns a bringer of „fools and emblems of death... spitting malediction at a beaten, recumbent world (with) crimson torches to fire the furnaces of heaven and the roaring holocaust of... vengeance...“. It is now a world full of dead people, fauna and flora, with vultures and stray dogs having a field day feasting on the slaughter. This present catastrophe is immediately juxtaposed to another period when similar atrocities had occurred: the fodder of humans, fauna and flora again „had happened before, long, long ago in a legend. The earth broke the hoes of the grave-diggers and bent the iron tip of their spears.

Then the people knew the time had come to desert their land, abandoning their unburied dead and even the dying, and compounding thereby whatever abomination had first unleashed the catastrophe...“That is how the reader can understand the story of how the vanquished and wounded and disillusioned ended up living as the Abazon people are, (AOS: 32-33), symbolizing the whole of Kangan. It is the story of the cruel Sun sowing a recurrence of deprivation, tribalism and genocide

Here, Ikem's Hymn and the storytelling of the Abazon Chief merge. The two narrators, as Achebe's alter ego, have packed into their stories“ sub-texts the genesis of Kangan's socio-historic-political-economic and spiritual disintegration.

Their story has unraveled the code, as Abdoulaye (2014) puts it: they are ensuring that „the anthills surviving to tell the grass (Beatrice, Elewa, et c) of the savannah about last year’s brush fires“ (AOS: 31) do not miss details of the nation’s past horrors implied in the fires of, for example, genocide since the 1960’s. The Chief says „Nkolika“ (Recalling-Is-Greatest) is a great name given a child as an affirmation and justification of something important to remember. To us listening to the Chief’s story and the Hymn, it is the struggle for true nationalism as implied also in Abdoulaye: 2014; Mwinlaaru: 2014; Gogoi: 2015. This is in answer to Chief’s question personifying the story: „Why do I say that the story is chief among his fellows?“ Ikem and Chief have partly answered it: because the new generation is being taught how to “see” the proper way to the struggle, to “see” in a special way, to “see” what they have never known before (Marla Solomon: 1990). Like in traditional roles of barbs, griots, teachers, priests, rabbis, scholars, et c, they are going to form a very solid institution of carriers of memory, of oral and written history, the cultural consciousness of society (Vansina: 1985: 114). From intertextuality, we now for instance decipher the implied history of Nigeria’s woes: the extermination of Abame people (the white man’s reprisal for killing a white man and thereafter, seeking out Okonkwo to destroy before he hangs himself: Things Fall Apart); it is the retelling of the horrific experiences of pogroms against the Ibo migrants living and working in Northern Nigeria (Gagiano: 2014) – the massive killings of Igbos all over the country as the genocidal dragnet combed the country. We are reviewing similar killings after Igbos declared a Biafra-against-State war, with subsequent state recruitment of white mercenaries and massive deployment of war planes to bomb the Igbos to extinction; we decipher the mass starvations to death of millions of Biafrans/Igbos, especially children, as State and European allies declared food embargo on Biafra; it is the continued marginalization of the Igbos even when their homeland is a crucial source of state economy from oil and other land produce. This is, therefore, another complementary interpretation of There Was A Country by Achebe (2012) in which these atrocities symbolized in Ikem’s Hymn and Abazon’s drought are well documented. It is also a supplement to Soyinka’s You must Set Forth At Dawn: Memoirs (2006: 133-52) in which these atrocities against a tribe are again very graphically documented for future generations. From this history, Achebe makes a critical political lesson to future leaders to avoid falling into depraved practices of their predecessors, what Mbembe (2015) calls a „negative moment“ in, for example, his South Africa of today, a moment many African countries have experienced: you oust a dictator to establish a worse dictatorship! Crucially, therefore, it is a political statement of how African literature should act a liberating teacher to Africans in conflict resolution: how to reshape her future in a more liberating and humanizing way from recycling atrocities, animalism, individualism; it is a „recreation of a social consciousness“ a living testimony for a better ideological orientation, a meaningful change... (Ulogu and Ogiageli Udogu: 2018; Rumana Siddique: 2017; Okihiro: 1981; Amuta: 1983; Rodrigues: 2007; Neimneh and Abussamen: 2017; Zapata: 1993; Dwivedi: 2008; Olufunwa: 2002; et al.).

This is why storytellers are hated by autocrats; they say too many revealing things: „storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control; they frighten usurpers of the right-to-freedom of the human spirit – in a state, in church or mosque, in party congress, in the university or wherever...“ (AOS: 153).

„The Story“ as memory, inheritance

Anthills now becomes, all at once, a combination of what the Chief (Achebe) says a story is and does and then what Ikem’s writings and Beatrice’s views and character stand for. It is a fusion of what African literature should be and do: helping us recall and record our past; helping us gain our true identity and values, our “rightful place in the history, in the universe of the natural and human” for cultural-social-political-economic- psychological survival... (Ngugi: 1993: 77-78); helping us to see the spiritual value inherent in our history, that is, seeing for instance creative writing as even an inspired documentation of the Divine as in Mamudu’s words, (1993: 51): Creative writing, the storyteller’s art, is the divine will made manifest among men, for the guidance of man and as a curb on the forces of oppression: the nature of its methods is unique, needing to be understood to be appreciated. The storyteller or writer is a chosen, ordained vessel; his art stands firmly on the acute, complex vision and response to his environment.

The eternal verities of his work are superior to, therefore, not to be judged by, the demands of representational faithfulness. And this is going to be possible because Anthills becomes, in the tradition of a father, Achebe, as historical actor and Teacher, a bequeathing of his treasures to the children, genealogy (Haley: 2003) as a social and cultural movement (Bornat: 2003). This is because the greatest treasure a story leaves behind is **memory**, that “chain of tradition which passes a happening on from generation to generation” to enforce our reminiscences to help us to see the “**meaning of life**” (Benjamin: 2007: 98-99). This is how „the storyteller joins the ranks of the teachers and sages. He has counsel – not for a few situations... (but) to reach back to a whole lifetime (colonial and postcolonial, a life involving his and other people’s experience).

His gift is the ability to relate his life; his distinction, to be able to tell his entire life... (because he is) the figure in which the righteous man encounters himself” (Benjamin: 108-109).

But again, as one who has seen this cruel history, the Nigerian cycle of violence and oppression since the 60’s, Teacher Achebe uses Ikem to apocalyptically, foretell the end of this scorching Sun, any dictator’s reign of terror: „Take care that the ashes of the world rising daily from this pyre may not rove enough when they descend again to silt up the canals of birth in the season of renewal...” (AOS: 31). In the end the prophecy occurs: Sam has lived by the sword and he dies by another General’s sword – General Ahmed Lango.

3. Anthills as a Story of Hope a) Beatrice as antithesis of past, present chaos

Despite the coup and a recycling of Generals and soldiers on the reins of power, the omnipresence of armed soldiers littering Basra and the Kangan countryside, the drunken soldiers redoubling bribe demands from drivers and raping school girls and even shooting civilians - all as part of a historical cycle, typical war crimes against civilians, Anthills ends on a positive note. Those „anthills“ of a new generation led by Beatrice are ready to take over from Ikem and the Chief of Abazon to tell another story: the way to a better future. Achebe, therefore, in the characterization of Beatrice and her role of narrator, endows her with a masculine figure where the self-imposing men have rendered themselves emasculated of leadership ability. She is the visible leader, with no connection to „The Sun“, the rule of the generals. For example, she has lived an independent life untouched by the male chauvinism of the chief political actors, a typical, compact political patriarchy of male dominance of politics in Africa; she does not succumb to intimidation of even the terrifying power and the sexy habits of Sam. His

impressive riches and omnipotence mean nothing to her. In fact, she becomes his sadistic tormentor. Dancing with him, she times the sure moment of his egodestruction: “when he was fully aroused”, clinging to her desperately (AOS: 81), she rudely extricates herself from him. The President is devastated, too hurt and too humiliated to continue the chase. She is equally level-headed with even Chris, the boyfriend she really likes: she never tires to warn him of the grave danger he is in consorting with a tyrant; in fact Chris has grown a childish desperate dependence on her and will, in the end, appreciate her concern for him. To the naive male world, she has in fact earned herself the name of an African version of Madame Pompadou (AOS: 84): an allusion to independent, clever, fearlessly manipulative and masculine women; in effect, therefore, a typical modern, educated lady who wants her freedom from any male interference because she has attained the women lib stage to decide what is wrong and what is right. She is on record for despising male chauvinism right from childhood: as a narrator, Achebe has imbued her with intelligence to know the present patriarchy and male chauvinism have been compounded by the Christianity her father preached so vehemently, yet brutalizing her mother beast-like. To her, the father, the male world, has become a “world inside a world inside a world” (AOS: 85), the repetition turning patriarchy into an extended metaphor of imprisonment in a world of traditional culture norms and the new reinforcement from the pre and post-colonial Christian and political world. This is why she has rejected marriage; it would bring self-imprisonment to her happiness, to her self-sufficiency, and her conscience (AOS: 89). In effect, she becomes the author’s mouthpiece on how the whole class structure of society gives political, social, economic and even moral superiority to the male world. The female is doomed to the fixed cycle role of children producer, food procurer/gardener, sex provider and answering to other male needs and demands.

b) Beatrice, the new Chief Storyteller

Achebe gives her not only the role of narrating this position of women in society, but also a role to act writer, artist, and a modern intellectual woman articulating all these roles (of artist and women) into African society and literature (Mamadu: 1993; Rajesh: 2014). It all begins with Ikem, a fellow writer/artist on women and peasant affairs praising and thanking her for introducing her “into the world of women” (AOS: 96). Adjusting his incomplete view of them, Beatrice gives him and all of us, her decisive lesson:

But the way I see it is that giving women today the same role which traditional society gave them of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough, you know, like the women in the Sembene film who pick up the spears abandoned by their defeated menfolk. It is not enough that women should be the court of last resort because the last resort is a damn sight too far and too late” (AOS: 91-92).

She has the responsibility, the correct line of leadership in these affairs and so she should tell us; so, Ikem urges her on I can’t tell you what the new role for Woman will be. I don’t know. I should never have presumed to know. **You** have to tell us. We never asked you before.

And perhaps because you’ve never been asked you may not have thought about it; you may not have the answer handy. But in that case everybody had better know who is **now** holding up the action” (AOS: 98). (Author’s emphasis).

Their discussion bears down to one conclusion: there will have to be a massive change of heart from everybody to accept reforms and a revolutionary change; everybody will have to contribute to alleviation of burdens against

all the oppressed all over the world across race, caste, class and gender lines. Collaboratively, people must give solutions to the present contradictions bedeviling especially African societies. No simplistic theories of solutions and the usual orthodoxies of theorists, simplistic remedies and idealists. And the artist must be among the first to articulate the contradictions in society because, as Ikem puts it, “a genuine artist, no matter what he says he believes, must feel in his blood the ultimate enmity between art and orthodoxy” (AOS: 100).

c) Beatrice, the cleansing, interceding symbol

In the end, Achebe’s introduction of myths and gods elevates Beatrice to the role of Idemili (daughter of the Almighty): she is in effect a goddess, the priestess of Agwu, an intercessor between almighty and any man seeking power; she is an essential link between deity and any man’s endeavors. This elevates her above the male world because, in the new Africa, woman’s place in cultural-political-economic and social issues must be taken seriously. In her goddess role of ensuring evils of ambitious men like Sam are curbed; she becomes a cleansing hand of God, as Mamadu observes (1993) because a „Nwanyibuife“ must from now on fight against the pollution of nations by individualistic politicians, intellectuals and money magnets, specialists in corrupt cartels. This is giving her a very meaningful voice in the new Africa because she is going to be a future pillar against the cause of postcolonial evils: a male-dominated world. So, she is now the hope for a better future, meaningful opportunities and human rights, a new unity against individual interests (Ngozi and Obiageli: 2018); Abisola Awogu & Afolalu Akindele: 2016; Njoku: 2016; Nwagbara: 2009; 2010;).

This mission is dramatized at the end of the novel, in the symbolic takeover of the male roles, relevance and dominance: her home becomes a symbolic nation of refuge and peaceful settlement and co-existence; she takes over the role of naming the baby-girl of Elewa and Ikem, a role previously reserved for the child’s father. Above all, she looks after a symbolic group comprising previously unrelated abilities, ethnicities, religions, professions, etc. It is a new yearning of liberation Africa needs.

Traces of this yearning have come up earlier in the narrative:

First of all, it is what Chris eventually visualizes as he moans the death of Ikem, as he flees Basra and goes through an education process that eventually redeems him morally “to die with dignity” (AOS: 231): he would love to be in a world of love and unity, not of ignoble deeds of selfish politicians, elites and merchants. Secondly, the yearning is also the vision Ikem struggles to see realized in Abazon and Kangan as he gradually cuts himself away from the Sam junta, politicizes Basra Lottery Club and Basra university communities, and then combines with Beatrice to problematize contradictions of Kangan/African societies and come up with a solution, Beatrice in the lead. So, Achebe is completing the same vision the Chief of Abazon is telling his audience, us: the importance of memory and communication, of African literature, why we must know when rain began to beat us so that we know when we tried to dry ourselves and how far we have gone in getting decently dry. Therefore, by giving the baby-girl a symbolic name of a male, AMAECHINA, **May-the –path-never-close**, it is the Path of Ikem, a Shining Torch, because Beatrice is sure “the man (Ikem) is floating around” them right there, “watching with that small-boy smile of his.

I am used to teasing him and I will tease him now... (AOS: 222); his intellectual, revolutionary spirit joins the Chief’s and Beatrice’s to lead Kangans/Africans, and it must never close, die. There is, therefore, at the end of

the novel, a sense of redeeming the African dignity through everyone's acceptance of Beatrice's new role: a woman has become a very important symbol of unity and meaning to people's new self-realization. The happiness surrounding the naming, hard upon the death of two boyfriends to two women brought together by misery is significant: it is no more a mourning time but a celebratory occasion to look ahead for a better future, because AMAECHINA, this spirit of African rebirth, this new view of what African literature should do, joins and comforts them all.

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