

Apocalypse and Regeneration: Treatment of African History in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

Dr. Rajkumari Ashalata Devi*

*Assistant Professor Department of English Manipur University, Canchipur, Imphal -795003

I. TEXT

In his novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*¹, Chinua Achebe interprets African history to re-invent Africa as well to reclaim the lost dignity of his nation. After independence in 1960, the Africans dream of a new enlightened nation where the subverted native values and civilization flourish once again. However, the native rulers fail to restore the nation to dignity. Instead of healing the psychic wound, they mimic the colonizer thwarting the hope of the suffering masses. To give shape to such a distorted African history, Achebe resorts to the depiction of the variety of neo-colonial ills that have plagued Africa since independence. In this sense,

Anthills of the Savannah gives us a true picture of the post-colonial African predicament marked by disillusionment and frustration thereby exploring Achebe's regenerative vision of a wide-ranging and egalitarian society where the marginal people find their space and time to have their say.

The novel is set in Kangan, the fictional African state in the 1980's and centers round the four western educated friends, Sam Okoli., Ikem Osodi, Christopher Oriko and Beatrice Okoh, on whose hands the fate of Kangan rests. Sam's military regime is an alternative the people welcome to the corrupt politicians and educated elite thinking that Sam, being a coup leader, will erase the present ongoing malady. But his government turns out to be a replica of the colonial government. The only change evident is that the native rulers play the role of the colonial master, exploit the masses and justify their action in the name of domestication: "***They have the animal capacity to endure the pain of, shall we say, domestication. The very words the white master had said in his time about the black race as a whole. Now we say them about the poor***" (40). Achebe's target in the novel is the native rulers like Sam who are unable to dismantle the colonial legacy. To him, the failure of the nation is due to the failure of leaders like Sam, who usurps power for personal gains and denigrates the masses. In *The Trouble with Nigeria* he points out:

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 leader to rise to the responsibility, to the challenge of personal example which are the hallmarks of true leadership.² Through Sam's character Achebe satirizes the native rulers who trouble the nation with all kinds of neo-colonial ills so that the educated elite come to the forefront and perform the task of stirring national consciousness and educating the masses.

Before Sam's proposal for Life Presidency, Kangan leads a tranquil and peaceful life. However, Sam's unquenchable thirst for power disrupts Kangan and the disruption of Kangan throws light on the crumbling of African societies in the 1960s. Out of the four provinces of Kangan, the Abazonians oppose Sam's proposal while three have voted in favour of him. For their hostile stand against him, he punishes the Abazonians by ordering "...all the water bore-holes they are digging in your area to be closed so that you will know what it means to offend the sun. You will suffer so much that in your next reincarnation you will need no one to tell you to say yes whether the matter is clear to you or not" (127). After two years, to amend their mistake, "a peaceful and goodwill delegation" (16) from Abazon comes to Bassa to meet Sam. The need to adapt to changes and the helplessness of the old ways are reflected in the Abazonians submission to Sam. However, Sam refuses to respond to the delegate. He shuts himself inside his Presidential Palace and his action is suggestive of those in power who feels that detachment can only protect the aura of power. The leader of the delegation mocks his idea of Life Presidency saying that "even when a man marries a woman he does not marry her for ever. One day one of them will die and the marriage will end" (126). Through the parable of the "tortoise and the leopard", the delegate has come to tell their story of resistance and struggle to checkmate power so that they can give guidance, sustenance and moral support to future generations. To emphasize his motif of struggle, Achebe further resorts to the myth of Idemili in which power is checked and restrained by female resistance (represented through the character of Beatrice). What is to be noted here is Achebe's retrieval to storytelling and the past for models which he believes has the impetus to direct the present and shape the future. His observation may be quoted:

A writer who feels the need to right this wrong cannot escape the conclusion that the past needs to be recreated not only for the enlightenment of our detractors but even more for our own education. Because, as I said the past with all its imperfections, never lacked dignity... We cannot pretend that our past was one long, technicolour idyll. We have to admit that like other peoples past ours had its good as well as its bad sides.³

Instead of attending to the voice of the people, Sam arrests the six leaders from Abazon at the Bassa Maximum Security Prison. However, their imprisonment will infuse in Ikem a new zeal to fight and resist the onslaught of Sam's military regime. Sam's cabinet thus divorces from the masses and replaces the place vacated by the colonizer. The displacement of Sam and his cabinet, the intellectuals, "the cream of our society and the hope of the black race" (2) from the masses perpetuates the social malaise more thereby making the hope of social and political renaissance an illusion. Far from attempting to subvert and reclaim the embittered history, they act as catalysts for change, but a change for the worse.

While Sam is deeply immersed in the whirlpool of power, Chris, Ikem and Beatrice identify themselves with the people and involve with their problems at a later stage if not in the beginning. Ikem, being an editor (*National Gazette*) and a revolutionary, is the first character who feels "the pain of the wound in our soul"⁴ and sees the corrupt ways of the power-monger leaders like Sam in nakedness. Even though he "had no solid contact with the ordinary people of Kangan" (39) he sees himself as the passionate defender of the poor and the dispossessed, so to say, the less-privileged class and the wretched of the earth. Unable to tolerate the abuses of the policies of the government, he launches editorial crusades against the military government and joins hands with the masses in their movement. In fact, he emerges as the only character who protests against the authority of all sorts: political, social and sexual. Through his character, Achebe depicts the role of the writer in the new nation, which is to give "re-education and regeneration"⁵ and also portrays the native as subjects or makers of history to present difference, originality and heterogeneity since "no man can understand another whose language he does not speak (and 'language' here does not mean simply words, but a man's entire world view)"⁶.

For being an Abazonian, Ikem is suspected of instigating the delegation. To check and counter Ikem's revolutionary activities through the editorials, Sam suspends Ikem from the editorship of the *National Gazette* who he thinks is involved with the Abazon agitators. The arrest of the six leaders and the visit of the taxi driver, whom Ikem once bullied in the traffic jam, awaken him and realize the problem his country faces at the moment. In fact, he gains insight into the failings of those who are in power and comes to the conclusion that the failure of the new nation is "the failure of our rulers to re-establish vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed of his country, with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation's being" (141). Achebe's stand is overtly expressed here. Thereafter, Ikem bridges the gap between the ruler and the ruled by helping the people of his draught stricken homeland Abazon. His views on women also transforms from a patriarchal to a more customary attitude. Thus, he dissociates from the mainstream and becomes one with the masses realizing that the movement towards change must not be one-sided but multi-faceted and united. In his lecture, "The Tortoise and the Leopard—a political meditation on the imperative of struggle" (153), he claims that Nigeria's problem lies in the oppressive ruling class rather than the external threat of colonization. Ikem's view reflects the post-colonial predicament in its totality. He criticizes the elite for perpetuating the governmental corruption by neglecting the needs of the people. He also rejects orthodox textbook revolutionary and proclaims that "as a writer I aspire only to widen the scope of that self examination" (158). To eradicate the social and political malaise, he proposes to develop its inner strengths and to "re-form it around what it is, its core of reality, not around an intellectual abstraction" (100). Under the prevailing conditions, revolution may be necessary but reformation relying more on experience than theory is the most satisfactory solution to erase the neo-colonial social and political ills.

Later, for his revolutionary activities and speaking out against the military government, Ikem is branded an NTBB, "anything inconvenient to those in government is NTBB" [Not to be Broadcast] (61), and arrested and consequently murdered. However the government releases a fabricated story that Ikem is killed in an encounter. Even his body is not handed over to his friends for burial. Indeed, Ikem becomes a victim of state repression. Nevertheless, he is able to instill a sense of hope which helps in driving the people into action that the people become more explosive in their defiance. The death of Ikem also transforms Chris that he wakes up to the need for active intervention. To further the movement, Chris leaves his job and goes to a hideout with Immanuel, the President of the University Student's Union of Bassa and Braihmoh, the leader of the taxi driver's union. To open the eyes of the masses and also to help people gain insight into the failings of the government, he exposes the true account of Ikem's murder in cold-blood through the media.

For safety and also to pay homage to the martyred Ikem, Chris, Braimoh and Emmanuel leave for Abazon. On the eve of his departure for Abazon, Chris matures through his relationship with the people and comes to realize the stark realities and horrible conditions of the deprived masses thereby enabling him to become one with the masses. On the way, Chris is shot dead by a soldier while saving Adamma, a young nurse who is traveling with them from Bassa. Rather than remaining detached Chris intervenes and thus emerges as a

heroic character and his endeavor is symbolic of his resistance to dismantle the ruthless nature of male power in the neo-colonial context.

In Bassa, the state crisis reaches to the climax that Sam is kidnapped from his Presidential Palace “by unknown persons, tortured, shot in the head and buried under one foot of soil in the bush” (219). After Sam’s murder, the Army Chief of Staff takes over the reins of power and the Director, SRC is also untraceable. Indeed the country is on the verge of chaos: “This our country na waa! I never heard the likeness before. A whole President de miss; like old woman de waka for village talk say him goat de miss! This Africa na waa!” (213).

To carry on the unfinished task left behind by Ikem and Chris, Achebe employs a woman character, Beatrice, who becomes a harbinger of a new hope to delineate and “appease an embittered history” (220). Through her character, he presents the new enlightened woman who would be the companion to man in this continual historic struggle towards change. Despite her anguish and suffering, Beatrice carries on the struggle. Her home becomes the shelter of Emmanuel, Braimoh and Adamma, members of the common people and a group signifying more varied in class and ethnic origin. In this group, the barriers of class and gender are erased and a new alliance is formed to mould the embittered history around its “core of reality”. Indeed, the people, the real victims of the callous system who are sidelined and silenced must be included and made visible for social regeneration and progress because it is only when they voice their depraved and wretched condition that an inclusive vision of a new and enlightened society could emerge. “The group that coheres around Beatrice is to be the catalyst of the future...In this small group, the tendencies to nepotism and corruption which have compromised elite rulers in the past, will presumably be mitigated by the advent of women’s salubrious force”⁷. Finally, Achebe’s vision of a cross-class unity is made visible in the naming ceremony of Ikem and Elewa’s child, where people from different strata come together to bless the newly born child bridging the wide chasm of ethnic classes and gender differences. It heralds a new beginning disrupting and subverting not only Western tradition but also the African. In naming the child, Beatrice herself takes the role of the patriarch. Truly, she serves as a source of inspiration and passion to re-write as well adapt her culture for a better future. She chooses a boy’s name for the girl child and expounds: “AMAECHINA: *May-the-path-never-close*. Ama for short” (222). Here, Beatrice’ “our own version of hope” coincides with Achebe’s insistence on the need of “a new set of values—a new frame of reference, a new definition of stranger and enemy”⁸ to eradicate the confusion of values which afflicts the new nation and also to explore the human condition. Ikem’s vision is further reiterated by Elewa’s uncle who unites the hope for Kangan with the future of his niece: May this child be the daughter of all of us...

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

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

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

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

To conclude, Achebe ascribes the failure of post-colonial Kangan society, a symbol of Africa in general, to the failure of the leaders who divorce themselves from the public cause and problems of the masses, and also he builds an image of women as pivotal in the new social and historical context of post-colonial period. He suggests the need for struggle and vigil to checkmate the onslaught of power on human dignity and liberty. He also propels his countrymen to re-create a new egalitarian and socialist society. It is in the collective effort of the ordinary men and women that any society can sustain its unity and integrity. Indeed, group consciousness and communal effort can drive away the real enemy of Africa. Hence, it rests with the enlightened individuals, who have deep sympathy and harmonious link with the people, to create new meanings and values for a new social and political order. The problem Kangan faces is the result of the exclusion of women and the lower strata of society from its mainstream. To cure the malady and restore the nation to dignity, the people, men and women, must be treated as subjects of a new nation. Achebe thus invests the marginal people with streaks of heroism thereby emphasizing that the true saviors or liberators are the people themselves. Towards the end, the people occupy the centre and their role becomes as important as the enlightened elite’s. By rejecting the idea of European cultural and political domination, reconciliation is made possible by extending person-to-person connection across class, gender and political hierarchies. By learning from the mistakes from the past, the

Africans can avoid repetition of those tragedies which have overtaken their societies. Out of the distorted past, the Africans must create a glorious future, not in terms of war and pomp, but in terms of social progress and cultural growth. Achebe thus heralds the coming of a messianic age and the establishment of a worthy place for all citizens.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- [1]. Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (London: Picador, 1988). All textual quotations appearing in this paper are from this edition only.
- [2]. Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1983), quoted in C.L. Innes, *Chinua Achebe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p.118.
- [3]. Chinua Achebe, "The Role of the Writer in the New Nation", G.D. Killam, ed., *African Writers on African Writing* (London: Heinemann, 1973), p.9.
- [4]. Chinua Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher", G.D. Killam, ed., *African Writers on African Writing*, p.3.
- [5]. *Ibid.*, p.4.
- [6]. Chinua Achebe, "Where Angels Fear to Tread", G.D. Killam, ed., *African Writers on African Writing*, p.7.
- [7]. EllekeBoehmer, "Of Goddesses and Stories: Gender and a New Politics in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*", *Kunapipi* XII.2 (1990): p.104.
- [8]. Chinua Achebe, "Where Angels Fear to Tread", G.D. Killam, ed., *African Writers on African Writing*, p.11.