

Anthills of the Savannah: A Critique of Post-Colonial Leadership and Resistance in Chinua Achebe's Novel

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Abstract - Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) is a searing indictment of post-independence African leadership written after a long literary silence. The novel is set in the fictional West African state of Kangan and shows the degeneration of military rule into dictatorship, exposing the betrayal of the ideals of independence. In the neocolonial system, Achebe examines the theme of corrupting power, the alienation of the elite, sycophancy, and exploitation through the intertwined destinies of three friends – Sam, the military ruler, Ikem Osodi, the revolutionary poet and journalist, and Chris Oriko, the passive intellectual – and Beatrice Okoh, a perceptive woman.

The novel is a celebration of the resilience of common people and folk knowledge, represented by the anthills and the folk story of the tortoise and the leopard. It highlights the important role of intellectuals, storytellers, and the 'New African Woman' in resisting oppression and in imagining national rebirth. Achebe, using a range of narrative voices, political satire, and Igbo mythology, demonstrates the power of literature as a weapon of social protest and historical memory. *Anthills of the Savannah* turns out to be a grim diagnosis of Africa's post-colonial condition, but also a tentative hope for a more inclusive and responsible leadership.

Keywords: Post-colonialism, military dictatorship, neocolonialism, resistance, African leadership

Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), published after a twenty-one-year literary silence, marks a powerful return to fiction with a sharp indictment of military regimes that betray the hopes of independence. The novel continues the narrative trajectory begun in *A Man of the People*, shifting from the collapse of a corrupt civilian government to the grim realities of military dictatorship. As Nuruddin Farah notes, "in *Anthills of the Savannah*, we are back to where the story of *A Man of the People* was interrupted, in 1966, by the army takeover of power in Nigeria. Only we are not in Nigeria, but in a fictitious country called Kangan Republic" (Farah qtd. in critical commentary).

Set in the fictional West African state of Kangan, the novel explores the dangerous collaboration between local elites and

imperialist forces. Achebe's choice of a fictional setting allows the work to transcend specific historical events. As C. Vijayashree observes, "The absence of any particular historical real gives the work an air of freedom, and it refers not to a concrete situation but to an ideological formation which concrete situations have actually produced" (Vijayashree 45).

Achebe, as a socially conscious writer, viewed literature as a form of protest. He stated:

If things were perfect, there would be no need for writers to write their novels. But it is because they see a vision of the world which is better than what exists that they write. So, whatever they write, if they are true practitioners of their art, would in essence be a protest against what exists, against what is.... It is a protest against the way we are handling human society, in view of the possibilities for greatness and the better alternatives that the artist sees. (Achebe, "The Writer" 50)

This vision is echoed in the novel's critique of the post-independence elite. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o argues, many African leaders engaged in "the gold rush for the style of living of their former conquerors" after independence (Ngugi 12). Achebe powerfully dramatizes this betrayal through the characters of Sam, Ikem, and Chris.

Literature Review

Scholarly criticism of *Anthills of the Savannah* has largely focused on its portrayal of political power, gender dynamics, and the role of the intellectual in post-colonial Africa. Many critics read the novel as a continuation of Achebe's lifelong engagement with the failures of African leadership. Ngugi wa Thiong'o's influence is frequently noted, particularly in Achebe's depiction of the comprador bourgeoisie that replaced colonial rulers without transforming society (Ngugi 12).

Several studies highlight the novel's innovative narrative technique. The use of multiple narrators and the integration of folk tales, oratory, and graffiti have been praised for creating a polyphonic text that mirrors the complexity of African society (Vijayashree 47). Beatrice's character has received significant attention as Achebe's most fully realized female protagonist, symbolizing hope and cultural reconnection (Innes 89).

Critics such as Larry Diamond have drawn parallels between the fictional events and real Nigerian history, especially the murder of journalist Dele Giwa, which resonates with Ikem's assassination (Diamond 112). While some scholars view the novel's ending as cautiously optimistic, others argue that Achebe ultimately rejects revolutionary violence in favor of an enlightened elite leadership centered around Beatrice (Needham 134).

Overall, existing scholarship recognizes *Anthills of the Savannah* as Achebe's most mature political novel, blending satire, tragedy, and myth to critique neocolonialism while exploring possibilities for genuine social transformation.

Narrative Structure and Setting

Anthills of the Savannah is notable for its complex narrative structure and strategic use of setting. Unlike Achebe's earlier novels that largely relied on a single narrative voice, this work employs a polyphonic or multi-voiced narration. The story is told through the perspectives of Chris Oriko, Ikem Osodi, Beatrice Okoh, and an omniscient narrator. This technique allows Achebe to present a multifaceted view of Kangan society and prevents any single character from dominating the narrative (Vijayashree 48).

The novel is set in the fictional West African state of Kangan, a deliberate artistic choice that gives Achebe creative freedom. By avoiding a strictly realistic depiction of Nigeria, he explores broader ideological and political patterns common across post-colonial African states. As C. Vijayashree notes, "The absence of any particular historical real gives the work an air of freedom, and it refers not to a concrete situation but to an ideological formation which concrete situations have actually produced" (45).

The setting vividly contrasts the opulent world of the ruling elite with the harsh realities of ordinary citizens. The magnificent Presidential Palace with its "marble corridors and mahogany furniture" stands in stark opposition to the "squalor of the one-room shacks of the urban poor" (Achebe 18). This spatial contrast reinforces the novel's central theme of elite alienation from the masses.

Achebe further enriches the narrative by incorporating traditional African oral forms — folk tales, proverbs, political oratory, and graffiti. The story of the tortoise and the leopard, told by the old man from Abazon, becomes a powerful political metaphor for resistance against overwhelming power. These elements blend seamlessly with modern political satire, creating a hybrid narrative style that reflects the tension between tradition and modernity in post-colonial Africa.

The novel opens with a delegation from drought-stricken Abazon seeking an audience with "His Excellency," immediately establishing the central conflict between the marginalized provinces and the authoritarian center. This

setting and structure allow Achebe to move fluidly between personal stories and larger national issues, making *Anthills of the Savannah* both intimate and panoramic in scope.

Narrative Structure and Setting

Anthills of the Savannah is distinguished by its sophisticated polyphonic narrative structure. Unlike Achebe's earlier works that primarily relied on a single narrator, this novel shifts fluidly between the first-person perspectives of Chris Oriko, Ikem Osodi, Beatrice Okoh, and an omniscient third-person narrator. This multiplicity of voices creates a rich, multi-layered portrayal of Kangan society and prevents any single viewpoint from dominating the story. The technique also mirrors "the fragmented and contested nature of truth in a politically turbulent post-colonial state."

The setting plays a crucial symbolic role. The novel is located in the fictional West African republic of Kangan, a deliberate artistic decision that allows Achebe to comment on broader ideological issues. The stark contrast between the opulent Presidential Palace — with its "marble corridors and mahogany furniture" — and the "squalor of the one-room shacks of the urban poor" powerfully underscores the deep class divide and the ruling elite's alienation from the masses (Achebe 18).

Achebe masterfully integrates traditional African oral forms such as folk tales, proverbs, political oratory, and graffiti. These elements blend with modern political satire, reflecting the tension between indigenous traditions and Western modernity. The novel opens with the arrival of the Abazon delegation, immediately establishing the central conflict between the drought-stricken, marginalized province and the authoritarian power center in Bassa.

Character Analysis The novel's strength lies in its memorable and evolving characters. Sam, "His Excellency," begins as an ambitious but relatively ordinary Sandhurst-trained officer. However, absolute power corrupts him. As the narrative reveals, Sam's major flaw is "that all he ever wanted was to do what was expected of him especially by the English whom he admired sometimes to the point of foolishness" (Achebe 49). He eventually becomes a paranoid dictator surrounded by sycophants.

Ikem Osodi, the poet, novelist, and editor of the *National Gazette*, represents the archetype of the committed intellectual. After meeting the Abazon elders, he undergoes a profound transformation. His fearless editorials and public lectures lead to his suspension and eventual martyrdom, making him a symbol of resistance.

Chris Oriko, the Commissioner for Information, starts as a detached observer who admits, "I have always been in the

middle” (Achebe 66). He rationalizes his complicity but gradually moves toward self-realization, culminating in a heroic but tragic act of defiance.

Beatrice Okoh stands as Achebe’s most fully realized female character. Educated in England, she is intuitive and morally courageous. Often referred to as a “priestess,” Beatrice survives the destruction of the three men. Her reconnection with her cultural roots and her role in the naming ceremony symbolize hope and continuity. As the President himself acknowledges, she is “one of the most brilliant daughters of this country” (Achebe 75).

Major Themes

1. Failure of Post-Colonial Leadership — Achebe relentlessly exposes how both civilian and military rulers prioritize personal power. As one character bitterly observes, “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” (Achebe 228).
2. Neocolonialism and Economic Exploitation — The novel reveals how foreign powers maintain control through debt and aid. During the Presidential Retreat, the American journalist lectures on debt servicing, revealing the continued economic subjugation of Kangan.
3. Resistance and the Role of the Intellectual — Through Ikem, Achebe affirms that writers and storytellers have a sacred duty. Ikem declares, “Storytellers are a threat. They threaten all champions of control...” (Achebe 153).
4. Gender and Empowerment — Beatrice represents the emergence of the modern African woman who transcends traditional limitations. Her name at baptism, “Wanyibuife — a female is also something,” is highly significant (Achebe 87).
5. Hope Amid Tragedy — While the fall of the “three green bottles” highlights recurring cycles of corrupt power, Beatrice’s survival and the naming of the new child (“Amachina — may the path never close”) offer cautious optimism for a better future.

Symbolism

Symbolism is central to the novel’s meaning. The anthills represent resilience and communal memory — they survive “to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year’s bush fires” (Achebe 31). The tortoise and leopard folk tale serves as a powerful metaphor for the necessity of struggle against

superior power. The Idemili legend (the pillar of water sent by God to moderate authority) contrasts with Sam’s destructive, sun-like tyranny and advocates for balanced, decentralized power. Finally, the three green bottles motif poignantly tracks the tragic downfall of Sam, Ikem, and Chris.

Conclusion

Anthills of the Savannah is widely regarded as Chinua Achebe’s most mature and politically sophisticated novel. While it offers a devastating critique of failed leadership, corruption, and the persistence of neocolonial structures in Africa, it does not descend into complete despair. Through Beatrice and the symbolic act of naming the new generation, Achebe suggests that genuine progress is possible when enlightened individuals remain grounded in their culture and committed to the welfare of the common people. As the novel implies, “the story... is the one that outlives the sound of war-drums and the exploits of brave fighters” (Achebe 124). The work continues to resonate as both a powerful warning and a source of cautious hope for post-colonial societies.

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