
The Protest Tradition in African Literature: Symbolism in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Abstract: *A critical examination of African literature will show that Africa before the advent of Europeans in Africa had two types of literature namely: oral literature and literature written in the indigenous languages. African literature raises the question of defining African literature geographically, racially or culturally and any impingement on any of these is vehemently opposed by African writers in their works: protest novel, protest drama and protest poetry alike. The main purpose of this paper is to explore and establish the idea of “protest” as aspect of the African fiction (novel) as espoused in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*. This paper adopts ecocriticism and qualitative method. It looks into elements of protest in the chosen text; in reflection to the African fiction and literature generally. It is the findings of this paper that protest in African literature results from the fight for decolonisation and a struggle against intimidation, dehumanisation, degradation of the environment through colonialism and neocolonialism. This paper concludes that this commitment of African literary writers has made African fiction a protest literature, especially as seen in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*.*

Keywords: *Protest, Tradition, African Literature, Colonialism, Neocolonialism.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The oral tradition is a major influence and source of African oral antecedent to the African novel (literature). “It seems to us quite clear that works done for African audience by Africans in African languages, whether these works are oral or written, constitute the historically undisputed core of African literature” (Chinweizu et’al 1980, p.11). The main reason of referencing the African antecedent from oral literature is to trace the root of protest in the African novel, as this position blazed the trail in the African novel, as this position blazed the trail in the protest tradition in African literature. The novels of post independence disillusionment evolved in African literature, among which is Achebe’s *Anthills of the*



Savannah. The literary works of this phase focused on the challenges of independence and the problems of leadership in African continent. Achebe is quoted as saying “The worst thing that can happen to any person is the loss of their dignity and self-respect.” The writer’s duty is to help them regain it (Ann-Chin et’al 2000, p.128). This could be his main reason in writing *Anthills of the Savannah* as a protest against African’s (Nigeria) loss of dignity and self-respect in the hands of colonialists and neo-colonialists. Yewah 1990 did not miss words when he says that “one of the crucial functions of literary discourse in the post-colonial context is that it serves a social critic for the dictator as a speech maker who struggles to consolidate his power and exclude the people from power sharing” (p.31).

The explication of *Anthills of the Savannah* in respect of protest literature cannot be overstressed. The role of the protest writer, the reasons literary forms: the prose form (novel), the poetry form (poems), and the dramatic form (plays) are considered as literary forms of protest in African literature. Literature is a reflection of the society, that is, that it reflects light and darkness, heights and depths, pain and pleasure that are inherent in the society.

Literature is indeed the mirror of the society. So, the writers react in protest against abnormality, danger, mistreatment and bad and ugly situations in the society. It means that society is a condition under which writers work. Bearing this in mind affords us the insight into the resources of human spirit, of its ability to love, hate or scheme of its triumph and frustration, complexion and perversities and so on.

Hence one may rightly say that literature is the society’s medium of expressing the inequalities and disequilibrium inherent in the society from its inception. Written African literature from the nineteenth to the twentieth century was unhappy sort of. Literary works are the writers’/critics’ effort to showcase and protect Africans lost pride through slavery and colonialism. Ohia (2023):

The realities in post colonial Africa compel different people to device various strategies for survival. In some African environments, the rigid and intimidating impact of colonialism and the callous and selfish orientation of neocolonialism result in asphyxiating poverty and excruciating suffering of the common people (p.3).

Similarly, Nnolim (2006) commenting further on the nature of African protest literature “with a strong sense of loss: loss of our dignity, loss of our culture and tradition, loss of religion, land, and our very humanity” (p.6).

This is evidenced in the titles of novels of that period. As a prominent place and emphasis is the sort of protest literature that poured out of South Africa over apartheid. It is also during this period that the African poets began to address themselves to the problems of colonialism by writing protest poems to condemn the colonialists and defend the oppressed people. Literature thus champions the course as a vehicle for the protest of military dictatorship, cultural and language imperialism, economic and political domination and so on. Thus, Achebe protests against structural classicism of an exploitative nature. In discussing protest in African literature, the concern so far has been with a situation in which Freire’s “A” was



the whiteman and his “B” the Blackman. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, the protest is to satirise the pitfalls of national consciousness and the nationalist’s protest for political emancipation.

The Origin, Development and Advancement of Protest in *Anthills of the Savannah*

The origin, development and advancement of protest in *Anthills of the Savannah* and African literature generally are the maltreatment of Africans by their various colonial masters in the Anglophone and Franco countries. Therefore, the writers see the need not to show concern only with exposing the ills and pitfalls that bedeviled the African continent from colonial rules; they transcend and move forward in their position, such that they suggest an alternative state of most nations in Africa. This evolves the eco-criticism theory in African literature through their various protests in their works. Kerridge (2013) suggests that “...eco-critics should evaluate texts from the viewpoint of environmental concern...” (p.361). Some writers have presented ideological options of other European capitalism. In fact, the African writers of modern literature have their roles determined by the emerging social and economic condition of their environments.

In another development, Omotayo Elizabeth Adesanmba’s (2019) study dwells on the formation of identities of explain the hybridity and liminality idea of Afropolitanism, analyzing how African migrants form new identities within the local and global environments. This can be traced to the whites’ marginalisation of their home land as well neo-colonialist forces that edged them out of their true identities. It can be juxtaposed with the colonialists’ occupation of their native land; promulgating draconian laws that are inimical to their human existence in their countries. For Omotayo (2019), “the interplay of both environments in the formation of new identities by African migrants is in two ways: one of them is in the assumption of new identity by African migrants in the host’s land as well as the assumption of fake identity for survival. The other way, identity is formed in the use of language, the language is said to be eclectic.

Anthills of the Savannah is one of the first major studies in African literature on the phenomenon of military rule. This is the Nigeria of the later 1980s. Griffith’s (1975) states thus: “with greater confidence and control, and with a deeper assurance, Achebe sets out once again to show in the historical process” (p.19). The novel explores military dictatorship in a fictional West African country called Kangan. Its thematic trust is on power and leadership. Leadership is also the starting point of *Anthills of the Savannah* which brilliantly synthesises the literary and political aspects. Accordingly, Udumukwu (2017) says: As a semiotic unit, therefore, *Anthills of the Savannah* does not merely reflect social experience as it is.... The novel, by contrast, re-presents its discursive function so that we can see it in a new form (p.50).

We are told that these three friends came into power unprepared. They were mates in secondary school and Sam was the less brilliant. But he is the supreme as the “Excellency” in his cabinet. The political maxim of power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely was demonstrated in the hand of Sam. He orders Chris on the publication or announcement of issues if Chris wishes to retain his post. In any government, the press is the mouth piece of



the government in the dissemination of information to people. But when this freedom of press is censored, the reason is not far-fetched. Achebe reveals that some politicians gain favour from the president by tarnishing the image of other people. He explores the character of Ikem Osodi as the voice of the society. He is the editor of the National Gazette. He takes a sober and critical look at man, society and the prospect for changing the society. According to Ikem in the novel: “society is an extension of the individual. The most we can hope to do with a problematic individual psyche is to reform it” (p.1). Achebe feels that the social change must be reformation of the mentality of the oppressed through determined enlightenment when Ikem in his lecture at the University of Bossa exhorts:

Go home and think... I want instead to excite general enlightenment by forcing all the people to examine the condition of their lives because, as the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth living (p.30). In the novel, Achebe selects his heroes from the lower class of society. Seeming to re-echo his own background and experiences, he portrays Ikem Osodi and his struggles to survive in a corrupt and decadent society. The novel also posits freedom for women through reformation and not through revolution. Similarly, the liberation of women in Nigeria can be achieved not through revolution (violence, military, feminism) but through reformation built around the care of reality in the society neither Elewa's way (passive, traditional) nor Beatrice's (active western) will help women's liberation. Achebe presents the extent to which excessive use of power could be so destructive to a nation which may lead to death and the collapse of the government. Achebe suggests that the important thing for change to come is mutual understanding and cooperation among citizens. He gave his optimistic view that man can still make would a better place to live only if we embrace education just like Ngugi Wa Thiong'o advocates in *Weep Not Child*. To him, unity will free the oppressed from oppression and reform the society from corruption and inhuman bourgeoisie.

Through the novel, Chinua Achebe is able to illustrate the ills in the Kangan society masterminded by the colonial masters who use the natives as labourers in their own God-given land. He also presents woman as an important tool in the society to further advance the protest in the novel. He sees woman as the next possible solution to the problem. Beatrice symbolises the class of uneducated women who knows their rights in the society and as such cannot be used as a weapon. She does not see herself as being deficient in any way because of her sex. She demonstrates her intelligence with those in power when she says:

That I got involved in the lives of the high and mighty was purely accidental and not due to any scheming on my part. In the first place, they all became high and mighty after I met them, not before (p.14).

The above passage shows Beatrice's influence on those in power. Achebe views Ikem Osodi as the voice in the society who protests against corruption and shameless exploitation of the people by a government. Finally, Achebe diagnoses the problem of the society and proffers a solution by the people being united.



Protest Elements in Anthills of the Savannah

Achebe explores the limitless power of the military by using the title of the novel as a symbol of the disintegrative effect of this forceful acquisition and disruption of power on the social and political lives of the entire citizens of countries where dictators are in control of political power. Achebe's use of *Anthills of the Savannah* shows the treeless, grassy plain in the tropical areas which during harmattan nothing seems to grow there except old anthills.

The political maxim – “power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely” is really applicable here in the sudden change in the mental personality of Sam, the gentleman of thought to a political despot overnight by power. In the novel, we are told that “days are good or bad for the cabinet depending on how His Excellency gets out of bed in the morning” (p.2). The issue of His Excellency detaining his cabinet for about an hour shows the feeling of insecurity on the part of this democratically elected government which uses undue intimidation to legitimise itself and hold on to power. Achebe reveals the statement about power through Ikem Osodi in “Hymn to the Sun” (Pp.30-33). He makes an analogy between the unrelenting powers of the sun and power of the military. He sees the sun and the power of the military; he sees power as unbridled and outrightly quarrels with this uncontrolled power. The first element of protest in the novel is the incidence between Chris and Ikem, the Editor of *The Gazette* “protesting against unnecessary interference from the commissioner for information (p.61). This is the first recorded conflict between the two supposed close-friends. Ikem's determination to fight back in defence of press freedom is a kind of protest. Achebe entitling the novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* sounds metaphorical and a protest in itself. The “savannah” is thus the political terrain (country), while the grass standing for human beings; the masses are prone to destruction by political fire after being scorched by the sun of oppression and corruption. “The worst threat from man of hell may not be their actions cruel far worst that we learn their way and behave more fierce than they” (p.43).

The song became an instant success and was sung up and down the street of Bassa, the capital of Kangan. The song exposes corrupt practices of our political leaders during the post-colonial era. The breaking of the three green bottles is equally symbolic in that it warns the African leader that the world belongs to the whole people and not to their little caucuses (p.191). Beatrice Okon as a character represents the voice of woman. Her character presents her as a part in the revolutionary trend. Achebe, being refuted for not giving the woman a positive role in his earlier novel, tries in promoting womanhood because women have something to contribute to the society. Achebe suggests that all hope is not lost; there must be a revolutionary struggle for a better society. It tells us that he looks upon the youth to revolutionise the society.

However, Achebe denounces the Marxists' brand of revolution which is concerned with immediate change. He instead believes in a “slow”, “piecemeal” and “undramatic” change – According to Achebe, violent revolutionary change will be necessary for taking the society out of dehumanisation, oppression and corrupt practices of the African leaders. Despite Ikem's sympathy for the poor, he is out of touch with them. He regards them sympathetically from afar but is not organically linked to their struggles. If anything, this goes to the heart of Achebe's novel: the inability of the nation's elite to connect with the masses.



2. CONCLUSION

Africans were exploited greatly both in terms of human and material resources, the introduction of an instrument for ruling known as “government” which is alien to the people and a tool for oppression sparked off the protest in African communities as written by the literary writers. They saw the need for the political and economic freedom of Africans in their native lands. Consequently, the writers – a product of the society where colonialism operates react to these atrocities of the colonialists in their works.

Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* also presents women as an important tool in the society. He sees woman as the next possible solution to the problems in Africa. This paper so far expresses certain facts that cannot be overlooked insomuch as the protest tradition prevails in African literature. It unveils the circumstances of the African societal setting in contact with the European culture. The class stratification in African society occasioned by the advent of the Europeans continues to widen the gap between the rich and the poor. It is this development that gave rise to the quest for self-determination and freedom. The situation in Kangan reflects a universal phenomenon, especially in African societies, in which economic privileges were enjoyed by minority whites at the expense of the majority Africans.

Recommendations

This paper recommends the continuous use of the novel by African writers to fight the ills of governments in African countries. African countries are bedeviled with atrocious acts by our governments which have committed more crimes than the ones witnessed in the colonial era. The neocolonialists must be fought to a standstill through the power of the pen by African writers. Protest in African literature must be encouraged by its application and practice.

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