

CHAPTER IV

ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH:

WOMAN AS AN INITIATOR INTO THE FUTURE

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Anthills of the Savannah¹ embodies the vision of an artist at the second crucial stage of African history – a nation passing through repeated military coups, even after independence. Beatrice, the heroine of the novel, embodies Achebe's search for permanence for a community – peaceful, stable and progressive. The novel is the result of Chinua Achebe's meditations for over a period of two decades as a political activist, and a responsible artist as well as an intellectual.

Achebe (b.1930) studied medicine and literature at the University of Ibadan. He worked for the Nigerian broadcasting company in Lagos. He has been at the Universities of Nigeria, Massachusetts and Connecticut. His novels cover the span of a series of political crisis faced by Nigeria – the collapse of the native power structures in Things Fall Apart², total victory over the natives and the establishment of colonial power in Arrow of God³, transfer of power to the native elite in No Longer at Ease⁴, fall of the first Republic in A Man of the People⁵, and the failure of the military regime in Anthills of the Savannah.

Background to the political situation in Anthills can be found in Achebe's The Trouble With Nigeria⁶ where he writes that the trouble with Nigeria is 'the indiscipline' of its leaders, a national condition of 'lawlessness' and 'selfishness'.⁷ Anthills proposes to give alternatives to these issues.

The action of Anthills develops through narrations by Chris Oriko, the Commissioner for Information, Ikem Osodi, editor of the National Gazette, and Beatrice Okoh, Chris's girlfriend and senior secretary in the Ministry of Finance and in addition is the omniscient narrator.

Major Samsonite (Sam) who was an army commander, after the civilian government's failure becomes the President of the Republic of Kangan with his classmates Chris and Ikem along with others holding important positions in his office.

Corrupted by absolute power, Sam invites Beatrice for a dinner party at the Presidential Retreat. Beatrice's self-respect as an African compels her to respond to his demand for sex in order to prevent him from sex with a white woman. After this event in the novel, Beatrice narrates about her childhood, sisters, her attitude towards women, and, her relations with Chris and Ikem. In the next chapter, the myth of Idemili is told.

Sam's suspicion about Ikem, an Abazonian, leads to Ikem's suspension as a minister. As a part of his decision to fight openly the fascist regime, Ikem delivers a lecture at the University of Bassa. As a result, he is arrested and killed.

Beatrice takes care of Elewa, Ikem's girlfriend who carries his child. Chris, after Ikem's death, goes into hideouts and is joined by Emmanuel, the President of Students' Union and Braimoh, a taxi driver. On his way to Abazon along with Emmanuel and Braimoh, Chris is killed by the drunken police officer for trying to save a girl from the possible rape by the man. The country learns of Sam's overthrow and dismissal of his military rule.

Beatrice, left alone after Ikem's and Chris's deaths, arranges the naming ceremony of Ikem's female child in her own flat. She breaks the tradition of naming the child by father and also gives the child a male name 'Amaechina' meaning 'May-the-path-never-close'.

Anthills poses a challenge to the interpreters because of its complex nature. It is a narrativization of the hypocrisy of the dictator and his gang of supporters, balanced against the miseries of the common humanity during the military rule. But it is also frankly argumentative in its justification of the significance of women in society. It is, to a

certain extent, even a fantasy in the sense that its heroine is the incarnation of the goddess Idemili.

The novel offers, on another level, an irresistible temptation to feminists because of its extraordinary emphasis on 'the woman'. It is true that Achebe elevates the feminine principle to the mythical and the legendary status as a symbol of the community or humanity as a whole. It is evidenced by the chapter devoted to Idemili myth (Chapter Eight : Daughters), by the letter of Ikem disclosing the realisation of the significance of women on his part, and by the inclusion of a number of women characters in the novel.

However, the feminists appear to be hesitant in their compromise with the kind of feminism they try to assign to Achebe. Some critics interpret Beatrice only as a woman in the traditional sense of gender orientation. For instance, Viney Kirpal assesses the novel as 'a womanist novel (suggesting reformation of the lives of woman) and not a feminist (militant, revolutionary) novel.'⁸ Even Chidi Ikonne regards Beatrice as, 'Achebe's most positive image of the modern woman in his novels so far'.⁹ Elleke Boehmer is of the view that Beatrice, 'remains trapped in a role that women have occupied many times before in the mythologies of nations, states and polities, she incarnates the ideals and the desire of men'.¹⁰

Beatrice is accepted as Achebe's image of a woman as the leader of future society by some critics. For instance, Supriya Nair thinks that 'Achebe's narrative shift to a female voice is his own acknowledgement of the need for female empowerment in the modern African context'.¹¹ David Carroll considers Beatrice to combine in herself 'both the worlds of modern politics and ... ancient myth'.¹²

The feminist interpretation of the character of Beatrice in particular and of the theme of the novel in general, appear to restrict the significance of Achebe's experimental approach to the crucial problem of permanence in social and political terms for countries like Nigeria. It should be noted that Anthills is neither a dramatization of the tragedy of the country nor mythologization of the political as a method of diagnosing for malady of Nigeria in the decades after independence. It is a philosophisation of the basic human issue of the problem of stability or permanence as a desired human condition. The plot concerns the overthrow of a military dictator but it is used only as a means. The novel goes beyond the political - it is a philosophical exploration into the possibility of alternative leadership that can ensure a stable, peaceful and progressive future for humanity. ?

Achebe is preoccupied in all his novels with the problem of politically regenerative, stable human condition. The title of the novel

'Anthills of the Savannah' clarifies the intense degree of his obsession with the problem. Anthills of Savannah are the only agonizing evidence of the harrowing destruction left behind. He desires to substitute on the creative level the tragic vision of the Anthills by the regenerative vision of the pillar of Idemili.

An evolution of a leader-in-the-making is a process-slow and difficult. He should learn laboriously the new ideas and thoughts along which the society should be developed. He should first assimilate those ideas into the pattern of his own thinking. Then, his own commitment to society as its leader requires him to initiate similar process of assimilation in the thinking pattern of the society or the masses. He had then to initiate the process of gradual change in the actual social and political life of the people.

Achebe had himself gone through the process of evolution in this thinking pattern especially in relation to the status of women in society before Anthills. In his novels before Anthills Achebe has hardly assigned any role worth mentioning to women and they have no special image in a polygamous and patriarchal set up. In No Longer at Ease though the character of Clara is fully developed she finds herself acting in a world dominated by men and while Obi genuinely loves her, he tends to patronise her and is paralysed as her intellectual superior.

- III trains Beatrice for the role of responsible leadership of society as a whole through evolution of her sense of affinity for the people of all classes; and
- IV initiates through Beatrice, already transformed into a socialist visionary prophet, a new approach which is neither feminist nor masculinist but humanist in its integration of the female with the male, vitally essential for the establishment of a stable and prosperous society.

I The Maximization of Gender-Transcendent Role of Beatrice

Achebe uses Idemili myth not only to link her to Beatrice but also to make Beatrice a spiritual guide. Through Idemili, Beatrice is brought close to people to understand and guide them. According to the myth Almighty sends his daughter Idemili on the earth to control power and she comes in the form of a pillar of water. The man who wants to gain power must worship her with a daughter. If Idemili is pleased with the man she answers him and if she thinks the man unworthy for power she punishes him.

The reason why Beatrice allows herself to be disgraced by Sam increases her status as goddess who prophesies his end. Being identified with Idemili, she has the capacity of intuition and prophesying. Observing Sam's behaviour with the white journalist, Lou

Cranford and caught in a combat with the Desdemona complex as interpreted by one white girl that black boys like white girls, Beatrice at Sam's call to come to his bed throws herself 'between this enemy and him.' (p.80) She submits herself to Sam, 'the sacred symbol' (p.80) of her nation. She does this like 'a loyal batman covering his endangered commander with his own body and receiving the mortal bullet in his place.' (pp. 80-81) She knows that it is shameful but says, 'I did it ... like Esther for my long-suffering people.' (p. 81)

Beatrice tries to save Sam from the abusive use of power and makes him aware of his responsibility by asking him, 'If I went to America ... into a White House private dinner and take the American President hostage' (p. 81) But Sam rebukes her as 'a racist'. (p.81) and does not understand that he is committing a blunder and symbolically disgracing Idemili through Beatrice who tries to bring him on the correct track.

Beatrice loves Chris because he understands everything about her without asking a single question as she says, 'he would very often startle me with insights about little things' (p.89) For Chris, Beatrice is a 'quiet demure damsel whose still waters nonetheless could conceal deep overpowering eddies of passion that always almost sucked him into fatal depths.' (p.105) For Ikem, she is 'the village priestess who will

prophecy when her divinity rides her' (p.105) In their last meeting Chris notices that Beatrice 'carried with her a strong aura of that other Beatrice whom he always described in fearful jest as goddessy.' (p.199)

Beatrice herself thinks that she is, 'the priestess and prophetess' (p.114) and she senses a danger for Ikem in the comments upon him by the white journalist and to Chris she prophesies that Ikem, 'will be the precursor ... But after him it will be you ... me and even Him.' (pp. 114-115) Her prophetic prediction almost comes true except that she alone survives the tragedy to carry on the work left by Chris and Ikem. She has insight into future when she assesses correctly that the Director of SRC, Major Ossai; the Chief of Army Staff, Ahmed Lango are 'the new power-brokers around his Excellency.' (p.76) Hence, Indrasena Reddy observes, 'Her understanding of people; her assessment of events; and her incisive insight into future bear testimony to her final image of both a priestess and prophetess.'¹⁴

In spite of maximization of gender-transcendent role of Beataice, the novelist establishes the validity of her character by rooting it in her gender-oriented role as a daughter and a beloved. She is an obedient daughter who observes her parents and sisters. She knows that being the sixth daughter her parents, mother in particular, disliked her, as the mother expected son with the sixth issue. She is aware of the secondary

status of her mother in her family. As a beloved, she loves Chris and hence unburdens all her anguish on him when he visits him after her return from Sam's party. She is angry with him because he does not care to see 'where his girl sleeps.' (p.113) But she is pleased with his soothing love. In this scene, according to Viney Kirpal, Beatrice shares 'patriarchal values'¹⁵. But it is Beatrice's love for Chris. She does not refute her feminine urges and responds to Chris in a natural manner. However, these roles of Beatrice get minimised because she transcends them and becomes a goddess and the group of people around her becomes a group of worshippers who worship her for their struggle against the wayward power.

II Evolution of the Complex Relationship Between Beatrice, Chris and Ikem.

Beatrice, Chris and Ikem are intellectuals and true friends aware of the evil around them. Each has to understand the other well because they have to use their intelligence to guide their people when they are confused. The novelist evolves scrupulously Beatrice's relationship with Chris and Ikem because it is Beatrice who understands both of them and brings their dreams into reality.

i) **Beatrice – Ikem Relationship**

The complex relationship between Beatrice and Ikem is essential because Beatrice not only understands Ikem but actually chooses his path. Beatrice loves Ikem as a brother and a friend even though for a short time this relationship comes 'on the brink of romance' (p.91) which she consciously avoids. Yet there is a spiritual love between the two. Beatrice likes Ikem because she has a great belief in his personality and she knows that he is 'different from ... illiterate and insensitive young men ...' (p.92) of her country. They together discuss frankly on many subjects and open their minds to each other.

Beatrice becomes Ikem's spiritual guide and through Ikem, the novelist reflects on issues like the place of women in society, theory of revolution, reformation and also on class struggle in the African context. It is her love toward Ikem that makes Beatrice plead with Chris to finish his differences with Ikem and come together to fight with the dictatorship of Sam. She knows that if Ikem uses his intelligence patiently and calmly the situations would change so she advises Ikem to be tolerant even after his suspension.

Beatrice gives Ikem an insight into the world of women and he expresses his changed views about women in 'a strange love letter.' (p.97) to her. This is deliberately called by him as 'a love letter' which clarifies and emphasises an intellectual Ikem's need for such a spiritual love towards another equal. Ikem is confident that Beatrice will tell him, 'what the new role for women will be.' (p.98) Hence, he asks about this role to her. He wants to bring woman out of her traditional oppression. He does not believe in revolution but emphasizes reformation as 'the most promising route to success.' (p.99)

Beatrice proves herself worthy of Ikem's faith by following his ideals. What is expressed by him in his love letter and in his lecture is brought into practice by Beatrice. Ikem, a socialist visionary appeals to different classes of society like students, workers, peasants, the unionists and women to unite, become sincere and honest in their duties first and then together resist the injustice. Beatrice is successful in creating good relations with all the members of different classes around her in society and thus chooses Ikem's path. This is an

important step taken by Beatrice on the path of struggle to bring peace in her country.

ii) Beatrice - Chris Relationship

Beatrice very consciously chooses Chris as her lover. Being disliked by her parents as a sixth female issue and the subordinate status of her mother in her family as is observed by her, she thinks that it is wrong to believe 'every woman wants a man to complete her.' (p.88) So when Chris comes along her way she says, 'Chris did all the chasing.' (p.87) But still she, too, likes him for his capacity to understand her. Chris loves her for her conservative style. His need to have someone intellectual to understand him is expressed through his choice of Beatrice and so whenever he thinks of her, it is not roses or music that come in front of him 'but a good and tastefully produced book, easy on the eye.' (p.63) For him she is 'a perfect embodiment' of his 'ideal woman.' (p.63)

It is Beatrice's love for Chris that makes her get angry with him when he does not immediately inquire her after her return from Sam's party. Being a practicalist, Chris advises her before visiting Sam's party to 'keep all options open' (p.73) but Beatrice goes to the party and after her return as C. L. Innes observes, while, 'Christopher prides on his detachment, his cool reasonableness, those ... very qualities ... irritate

and distress Beatrice.¹⁶ However, Emmanuel Ngara says, 'Their relationship is a relationship of equals who have a natural attraction for each other.'¹⁷ It is this natural love with which she spends a night in a dirty, unhygienic room of Braimoh with Chris before his last journey to Abazon.

Beatrice knows that Chris dislikes Sam's behaviour and policies that make him to prefer silence, indifferent detachment from the situation to open opposition. But Beatrice also knows that such a practical view is dangerous especially to the relationship between Chris and Ikem, because Ikem is not silent like Chris. Therefore, she requests Chris to communicate with Ikem so that both are able to fight the problems together. She rebukes Chris's complacency about his position when he sees the hierarchy of power like - Sam, at the top as a Prime Minister, then Chris as a Cabinet Minister in between and then Ikem as an editor of National Gazette. Although Chris confesses that there is no conflict as such between them Beatrice judges cleverly and remarks, 'the story of this country ... is the story of the three of you.' (p.66)

Beatrice - Chris relationship is significant because the result of Beatrice's motivating Chris is such that Chris, who up till now was passive, rejects to sign Ikem's suspension order. He not only goes into

hideouts but begins to complete Ikem's mission of struggle against injustice.

Chris needs Beatrice to understand his initial indifference to Sam's power and his last phase of struggle to complete Ikem's mission. Chris dies while liberating a poor girl from the police officer. Beatrice clarifies Chris's message to the gathering of a group of people of different classes and religions around her. She explains to them that Chris tried to save the girl to show that, 'This world belongs to the people of the world not to little caucus, no matter how talented...' (p.232) they may be. Chris wanted to liberate the girl from oppression. The group around Beatrice represents common, ordinary people of the country, 'the people of the world.' By appealing to them Beatrice teaches them to follow Chris's path and she herself follows it by remaining with them.

III Beatrice's Training for the Role of Responsible Leadership of Society.

To make Beatrice a responsible leader the novelist trains her through different experiences as leader must understand his country and people. Although Beatrice is an intellectual and a 'been to', majority of the people in her country are illiterate and ignorant. She has to understand these people and it is her moral responsibility to guide

them. Step by step Beatrice undergoes training, imbues in herself the lessons of these teachings and becomes a leader, a reformer.

The first step that Beatrice has to take to become a leader is to understand her society and the place of the woman in it. Beatrice observes that there is no need to believe that, 'every woman wants a man to complete her.' (p.88) This view of Beatrice stems not from her education in England but from the observation of her own family, as she says, 'there was enough male chauvinism in my father's home.' (p.88) However, when she meets Chris she does not adhere to this view or refute her natural feminine urge. The novelist makes her Chris's beloved because he wants to bring man and woman together for building a good nation.

Being educated in England, Beatrice goes away from the traditions, myths and legends of her own culture. The novelist brings her to her roots by making her listen to the songs of birds. It renews her contact with her roots from which she is alienated. Listening to the bird's song turns out to be a thrilling experience for her and the careful listening to it reminds her how her mother interpreted its meaning which is in the form of a question : 'Is King's property correct ?' (p.108) The unhappy experience at the Retreat has disgraced her and the bird's song soothes her injured mind and with tears in her eyes she answers to

the bird that the King's property 'his crown, his sceptre and all' (p.108) is taken away. She understands that there are many things like this bird which are unknown to her which will give her pleasure. This experience brings her close to her own culture and people.

The next experience that brings her close to the working class which she has to include in her plan for the future is her analysis of her maidservant Agatha's mind. Beatrice rebukes Agatha who does not serve Elewa well because Elewa for Agatha belongs to her working class and she is not her mistress. But Beatrice studies Agatha's psychology of being 'so beastly to the girl.' (p.183) She is enlightened with the truth that to be a master or to be a servant is a matter of luck and she begs pardon of Agatha at whom she always looked through the angle of a mistress. Henceforth, both of them will not be mistress and servant but human beings living together.

The novelist provides another opportunity to Beatrice to come close to urban poor of her society, through her visit to Braimoh's room. As she lives in a posh building, for the first time she sees Braimoh's room with 'a tiny plain-board window which gave directly on the bed and opened out on a huge, choked and stagnant drain. So it had to be kept shut at all times to keep down the smell and the mosquitoes.' (p.198) She understands that poor people like Braimoh

could not afford the spray of aerosol insecticide in the room where they live.

Beatrice's experiences increase her affinity with the people of different classes. This makes her succeed in collecting around her a group of oppressed and deprived people. Elewa's mother represents market women. Elewa's uncle is a peasant, Braimoh is a driver, Agatha and Elewa are servants, Emmanuel is a leader of students. Adamma is a student nurse, Captain Abdul is an officer. Even two religions are brought happily together when Aina, Braimoh's wife, although a Moslem participates in the dance after the naming ceremony of a Christian child. The group includes both male and female genders. Beatrice becomes a socialist visionary prophet in this act. As Idemili comes in the form of a pillar of water which gets itself connected with the earth, in the same way, Beatrice is trained by the novelist to fix her connection with the earth and earth's people to become their leader.

IV Beatrice as an Initiator into Future

Beatrice, already transformed into a socialist visionary prophet initiates a new approach which is neither feminist nor masculinist but humanist in its integration of the female with the male, vitally essential for the establishment of a stable and prosperous society.

The deaths of Ikem and Chris teach Beatrice that ordinary people must struggle against the misuse of power to save themselves. The ordinary people with various classes both men and women are oppressed people and so they dislike oppression and oppressor. They are ready to accept positive changes in their society and culture for the happy future.

Beatrice changes the tradition of naming a child by its father and names herself the female child of Elewa and Ikem. Secondly, she chooses a male name for Elewa's daughter and names it as 'Amaechina' meaning 'May-the-path-never close.' (p.222) It is the 'shining path of Ikem.' (p.222) Elewa's old uncle initially opposes such a change but when Beatrice declares the collective fatherhood of the child the old man understands that such a change is necessary for a new beginning and prays not only for the child's life but for everybody's life. The others in the group do not object the change initiated by Beatrice. This change is a part of struggle for good as Larry Diamond observes, 'Beatrice chooses for the girl the path of Ikem, the path of struggle ... of course, of inspiration and hope.'¹⁸ According to Govind Sharma, Amaechina's birth symbolises, 'the new Nigeria, free from social cleavage and bound by the ties of brotherhood and friendship.'¹⁹

The most symbolic change that is initiated by Beatrice is her choice of a male name for a female child. It means that the child includes two sides-male and female in its persona. It will be a female when looked at its appearance and it will be a male when looked at the name it bears. These two roles together suggest a new identity with one common element of humanity in them. This is the integration of the female with the male which is vitally essential for the establishment of a stable and prosperous society that is initiated by Beatrice.

Other Women

Other women characters in Anthills are portrayed by Achebe in such a manner that they complete and balance the picture of African woman. If Beatrice is an intellectual, other women represent illiterate, half-literate women and their positions in society.

Elewa

Being a half-literate salesgirl speaking pidgin English, Elewa Ikem's beloved represents a working class. She has her own simple ways of behaviour. Eventhough Ikem asks her to go alone at night she forgets her anger and next day she herself calls Ikem. She expresses her sorrow over Ikem's suspension with a loud cry and by weeping which is different from sophisticated ways of Beatrice. Her free conversation with the taxi drivers makes Ikem understand that Elewa and the driver

can converse in the most affectionate manner as they belong to the same class with which, Ikem understands, he has to mix. On the day of this enlightenment, the union between Ikem and Elewa takes place which results later in the birth of a female child. This union, according to Viney Kirpal symbolises, 'the total and true fusion of the intellectual with the earth and earth's people.'²⁰ Such a woman, who lives a simple life, without knowing intellectual life is made a witness to change initiated by Beatrice.

Agatha

Agatha, a maidservant of Beatrice, did not care for Elewa as she belonged to her own class which shows that class division is followed in the society. She has her own traditional moral set up and hence, she does not so much welcome Chris's visits to Beatrice's house, she, 'did not include him in her moral censure. (p.115) When Beatrice begs her pardon for her harsh words, it surprises Agatha and it turns her first, 'to shock and then through the mist of her tears, a sunrise of smiles.' (p.185)

Aina, Elewa's Mother, and Adamma

Aina and Elewa's mother are simple women. Aina, Braimoh's wife helps Chris in his mission of fighting against the evil by allowing him to use their room and later by allowing him to be taken at Abazon

at her parents' home for his safety. This shows the affection of a poor urban housewife for a man fighting against evil. Elewa's mother represents market women. She believes in traditional rites and hence, is surprised at Beatrice's proposal of naming the child by all of them. However, she accepts the change which shows that such simple people have flexibility of mind for accepting changes. Adamma, a student nurse, too, becomes a participant in the change initiated by Beatrice.

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