

Beyond the Savannah: A Feminist Reading of Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Abstract

This paper offers a feminist reading of Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. Employing a close reading and content analysis methodology, the study interrogates the novel through a feminist lens, particularly focusing on the portrayal of power dynamics, gender roles, and the silencing of dissent. The central research question guiding this analysis is: How does Achebe utilize feminist perspectives to expose the patriarchal structures that perpetuate political corruption and social injustice in post-colonial Africa? The study argues that Achebe's narrative reveals the insidious nature of patriarchal power, which manifests in various forms, including political oppression, gender-based violence, and the suppression of women's voices. By examining the characters of Beatrice and Chris, the novel highlights the limitations imposed on women and the dangers faced by those who challenge the status quo. Through a close reading of the text, this paper seeks to identify the specific ways in which patriarchal norms and values contribute to the downfall of the Kangan state. By analyzing the characters' actions and motivations, the study explores the ways in which gender intersects with power and how these dynamics shape the political landscape of the novel.

Key Words: Kangan, Feminist Lens, Political, Hegemony, Inclusivity

BACKGROUND, CONTEXT AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The continent of Africa has been historically dominated by patriarchal systems, where power is concentrated in the hands of men (Saungweme, 2021). This power dynamic has perpetuated gender inequality and hindered progress in various sectors (AU, 2023). Scholars like Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Sylvia Tamale have extensively explored the detrimental effects of patriarchy on African societies. In their works, they highlight how patriarchal structures limit women's opportunities, perpetuate harmful stereotypes, and stifle their potential (Harry B. & Vijayakumar Muthusamy (2023).

One notable literary example is Chinua Achebe's novel *Anthills of the Savannah*. Through his characters and narrative, Achebe prophetically critiques the destructive nature of patriarchal leadership. He portrays a society where power is wielded by men who prioritize their own interests over the well-being of their people. Achebe's novel suggests that the decline of such patriarchal systems is inevitable, paving the way for a new era where power is shared more equitably (Youssef Benzahir, Y. Pr Riyani El & Assaad Younes, 2020).

The concept of the "feminization of power" offers a potential solution to the challenges posed by patriarchal systems. This approach advocates for increased participation of women in decision-making processes at all levels of society. By empowering women and recognizing their valuable contributions, societies can foster greater inclusivity, social justice, and sustainable development. Scholars like Catherine Hoskyns and Amina Mama have championed the feminization of power, arguing that it can lead to more compassionate, empathetic, and collaborative leadership.

Indeed, the patriarchal nature of power in Africa has had far-reaching consequences for both men and women. By embracing the feminization of power, African societies can move towards a more equitable and just future. Achebe's prophetic vision in *Anthills of the Savannah* serves as a reminder that the decline of patriarchal systems is inevitable, and the rise of women's leadership is essential for the continent's progress (Ben-Iheanacho, 2020). Evidently, women empowerment and progress are preceded by establishment of the much desired gender respect, equality and partnership in the society.

Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* provides a scathing critique of post-colonial African politics, particularly focusing on the destructive impact of military dictatorship and the pervasive influence of patriarchal power structures. The novel is set in the fictional Kangan state, where a military coup has led to the rise of a tyrannical regime under the leadership of Sam (Akali, 2015). Sam is ever paranoid of any real or imagined political challenge and criticism of his misrule. Indeed, at every possible opportunity he ruthlessly deals with the opponents; hence, perpetuating a culture of intimidation and fear in Kangan.

Consequently, the novel highlights the cyclical nature of political instability in Africa, where military coups are seen as a quick fix for societal problems. However, Achebe demonstrates how such regimes often exacerbate existing issues, leading to further corruption, violence, and human rights abuses. The Kangan state, under Sam's rule, becomes a microcosm of this broader African political landscape, characterized by authoritarianism, nepotism, and a

disregard for the rule of law. Arguably, the situation in Kangan is that of apathy, inertia and despair.

A central theme in *Anthills of the Savannah* is the role of women in challenging patriarchal norms and advocating for social change. Characters like Beatrice and Adamma embody feminist ideals, resisting the traditional expectations placed upon them and actively participating in the political discourse. Beatrice, in particular, emerges as a strong and independent figure, defying the constraints imposed by patriarchal society. Her decision to preside over the naming ceremony of Ikem's daughter signifies a significant departure from traditional gender roles and underscores the importance of female leadership. The portraiture of the courageous, confident and able Beatrice underlines Achebe's desire and prophetic message to establish a gender inclusive governance as an imperative and panacea to sustainable partnership and progress in society.

By examining the novel through a feminist lens, this study explores how Achebe's work contributes to broader discussions about gender, power, and politics in Africa. The focus is on analyzing the ways in which female characters challenge patriarchal structures, the limitations they face, and the potential for women to play a more significant role in shaping the future of the continent. Indeed, as argued earlier, the feminist ideological praxis is used in the paper to account for inspiring admirable strategies, dynamism and resilience women employ to deconstruct the intrusive and crippling patriarchy in the society.

Feminist theory looks at gender relations in society, with the ultimate objective of evaluating the patriarchal structures that undermine women's progress (Butler, 1990). Feminist theory also searches out the patriarchal values and ideologies that inform, sometimes in silence, sometimes in an overtly cocksure fashion, the prominent work of the masculine canon. Some patriarchal roadblocks to women's advancement are rooted in cultural, political and economic structures in society. The structures usually define and elevate men to dominance over women and other vulnerable members of society. In this paper, Feminist theory is used to understand Achebe's portraiture of Beatrice as the moderator of excessive political egoism in Chris and Ikem, as well as the voice of reason in Kangan politics. Indeed, the theory helps the reader to appreciate Beatrice as the symbol of alternative leadership that embraces transparency, accountability, gender inclusivity and continuity.

While Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* is often analyzed through Historicism and Marxist Psychoanalytic lenses, a feminist reading offers a unique perspective on the novel's exploration of power, gender roles, and social

structures. Further, the theory aids in examining and appreciating the inspiring, admirable strategies women and the marginalized use to tame patriarchy in order to create a level ground for inclusive efforts to actualize believable progress in society. Indeed, feminist theory, in many strands, is an ideological praxis that informs the struggles women and the marginalized wage against any form of oppression.

A feminist approach to *Anthills of the Savannah* also highlights the limited representation of women and their marginalized roles within the patriarchal society depicted in the novel. While characters like Beatrice and Adamma are present, their agency is often constrained by societal expectations and incapacitating male dominance. The novel can be seen as a critique of the patriarchal structures that perpetuate gender inequality and limit women's opportunities for empowerment. On the other hand, the novel foregrounds a social vision where women are seen as their own liberators as well as the agents of much desired change in society. Even further the novel takes cognizance of women as equal partners in the governance of the society.

By examining the power dynamics between men and women, a feminist reading reveals the ways in which women are silenced and oppressed. The novel's focus on male characters and their political struggles overshadows the experiences of women, who are often relegated to domestic roles or portrayed as victims of male violence. Even further the novel critiques how women who attempt to be felt in social, political and economic domains are ignored or ruthlessly suppressed. Furthermore, a feminist analysis explores the impact of colonialism and imperialism on women's lives in post-colonial Africa. The novel's setting in a fictional African state reflects the broader socio-political context of the time, where women were often marginalized and exploited. By interrogating *Anthills of the Savannah* through a feminist lens, readers gain a deeper understanding of the complex ways in which gender, power, and society intersect. This approach effectively illuminates the novel's enduring relevance and its critique of patriarchal systems that continue to shape the world today.

MOVING BEYOND THE SAVANNAH: KANGAN WOMEN

The political landscape of post-colonial Kangan is characterized by a pervasive atmosphere of fear, intimidation, and oppression, particularly for women. Sam's rise to power has solidified a patriarchal regime that reinforces traditional gender roles and marginalizes women's voices. The male-dominated cabinet, complicit in Sam's tyrannical rule, further perpetuates this oppressive system. Women, often relegated to domestic roles or silenced by fear, are denied agency and opportunities for political participation. The

novel highlights the challenges faced by women in navigating a society dominated by male power and violence.

In a highly masculinized military governance in Kangan women are excluded. The political stage is dominated by men who are undermining each other. Nonetheless Sam has emerged as the iron fist military ruler. Simply put, Kangan, is a state of widespread terror. And in the words of Saikia (2015), "[T]he post-colonial situation in *Anthills of the Savannah* is marked by gross abuse of power, social injustice, repression, violence, brutality and general torpor exhibited by the common man" (91). The first casualties of Sam's political terror are the homeboys and advisors. Sam's paranoia drives him to harbour plans of cutting into size his real and imaginary enemies.

Scholars have shown that in oppressive regimes, intellectuals can compromise and the role of academics in oppressive regimes becomes challenging. In his book "Representations of the Intellectual," Said discusses the responsibilities and challenges faced by intellectuals in times of political and social turmoil (Said, 1994). Ironically, Sam marginalizes the well-educated and critical home boys who supported him to get power and other people critical of his regime, yet they work for him. Sam was a good man before power got into his head and would not spare anyone posing a threat him. The first to go is Ikem who is abducted from his house and later murdered. Though a foreigner, Mad Medico is the second to go by being deported for showing some sympathy to Ikem. The third to go is Chris who for sure knew he will be next to be arrested for not taming Ikem and not forthrightly becoming a sycophant to Sam.

In the context of masculinized Kangan political situation women are largely oppressed. Beatrice recapitulates how women are universally oppressed. In Kangan, this oppression is evident in the High Society where she lives with familiar persons like Chris, Ikem, Sam and a litany of other men. The aforementioned men have little regard for women and only take them as sexual objects. In addition to being given a token government job and neglected mistress of Chris, Beatrice is sexually assaulted and abandoned by Sam at Abichi, yet he knows that she a girlfriend to Chris, a childhood friend and a member of his cabinet.

Equally, Elewa is occasionally abandoned in love and makeshift marriage by Ikem who in most part is preoccupied with political activism. Note, Ikem as liberal as he is, has little time for Elewa, and she bitterly complains that Ikem has not given her material comfort like other men do. Evidently, Beatrice and Elewa are stressed women because their fiancés have immersed themselves in the hide and seek politics of Kangan and as it were abdicated their marital

responsibilities. Unfortunately, the two men are murdered by the same government they helped to take political control.

Women are oppressed at the family level too. Earlier, Beatrice recalls her childhood to underline her father's oppression. She reflects that her father ". . . was a very stern man, my father – as distant from us children as from our poor mother. As I grew older I got to know that his whip was famous not only in our house and in the schoolhouse next door but throughout the diocese and beyond" (*Anthills* p. 85). As Kalpakh (2013) puts it "[...], Beatrice's father's whip becomes the symbol of authority and violence in the novel. The violence in her family can be taken as the microcosm of the violence in patriarchal Nigeria" (p. 179), the fictional Kangan.

Nonetheless, women have put up a good fight to tame patriarchy, for their resilience and resistance is evident. Beatrice goes against all odds to acquire education in order to be autonomous, and argues that she chose career first and ignored traditional women's excuses of wanting to be married quickly. She reflects:

That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was anything like women's Lib. You often hear our people say: But that's something you picked up from England. Absolute rubbish! There was enough male chauvinism in my father's house to last me seven reincarnations" (*Anthills* p. 88).

Arguably, Achebe foregrounds Beatrice's rebellion to deconstruct patriarchy; hence, after the elimination of male characters in the novel, Beatrice and other women survive in order to get a chance and space to do something different and significant to bring political sanity in Kangan.

Elewa's female resistance and resilience is notable, naïve as she superficially appears. She quarrels Ikem for neglecting her and reprimands him for driving a small car and living modestly, unlike his corrupt contemporaries in the government. She retorts: "[Y]our work different than other people? No be the same government work? Me I no understand am –o" (*Anthills* p. 139). Thus, Beatrice's reflections and Elewa's reactions underscore what Achebe projects as women's struggles to tame patriarchy to get empowerment and autonomy in Kangan and beyond. Women solidarity is also notable in taming patriarchy. Beatrice takes care of the pregnant Elewa and accepts Agatha, her religious and conservative house girl as well as Elewa as team players and agents of change, their low station and illiteracy notwithstanding. Beatrice's inner voice affirms: "[I]t is now up to you women to tell us what has to be done. And Agatha is surely one of you" (*Anthills* p. 184). In short, Beatrice is underlining the need for women to take the lead in family and state affairs.

The reflection is symbolic of the need to empower women for progress in society.

The observation further projects the role Beatrice takes to officiate the naming ceremony of Ikem's child. Singler (2013) appreciates the roles Beatrice unselfishly plays in the novel to shape the lives of both men and women. She argues that:

Beatrice's character plays many roles, providing her with agency, rather than simply labels. She is a metaphorical griot, goddess, prophetess, and priestess, all together to shape her political philosophy, which reshapes tradition. Such dismantling of tradition through change is most evident in the naming ceremony, where Beatrice's home is the scene of a respectful transformation of customary practices. In this ceremony, which occurs at the end of the novel, Beatrice functions as a griot in the role of ceremony participant (p. 14).

Earlier in Chapter 8, Achebe had outlined Beatrice's positive attributes alluded to above in the legendary narrative of the benevolent divine Daughter of Almighty - Idemili. Any man aspiring for "[...] admission to the powerful hierarchy of *ozo* must go to present himself and offer sacrifices [to her] before he can begin the ceremonies, and again after he has concluded them" (*Anthills*, p.103). Beatrice and other women are positively and symbolically projected to play this role in the new Kangan.

In Beatrice, Singler (2013) reiterates "[W]ithin the political allegory, Achebe reconstructs the place of women in the novel's post-colonial society through the character of Beatrice [...]. Beatrice is a dynamic and round character: independent, educated, unmarried, compassionate and politically active" (p. 1). Singler continues to underscore the bigger calling of women in post-colonial politics explored in the novel. She observes that "[...] *Anthills* is a political allegory calling for government responsibility, critiquing corruption within the current system, and offering women as the idealistic resolution to the problem of exclusive, oppressive political social structure" (p. 2). Arguably, the women and right minded men are symbolically presented in the naming ceremony of Ikem's daughter as the correct people to take the responsibility of changing the devastating political landscape in Kangan and beyond.

Equally, there are men with progressive thinking that should be appreciated in this paper. The taxi driver who drives Chris to hiding, Emmanuel, the student leader who accompanies Chris in the journey to the North and Braimoh who accommodates Chris while on the run have done a commendable job to undermine Sam's efforts to arrest Chris. The actions of these men speak volumes of similar actions happening in the other parts of Kangan. Although Sam is toppled by fellow military men, the tensions

building in Kangan would have translated to a civilian unrest and possible takeover of the government. The military has opportunistically come in to do the obvious and take credit. However, Achebe's desires a peaceful takeover, synonymous to the collective engagement men and women undertake in attending and changing gender roles in the naming ceremony of Ikem's daughter at the closure of the novel. Beatrice takes the role of a man to officiate the process. Both men and women in this function appreciate and acknowledge that it is purposeful and good for the wellbeing of everybody, Bassa and Kangan. It underlines togetherness and gender harmony and partnership.

Immensely and singularly, it is essential to acknowledge Beatrice's inspiring admirable action in undermining patriarchy for the common good. Singler (2013) supports this action and observes that "[B]y breaking away from the custom and naming the baby herself rather than waiting for Elewa's uncle to do so, Beatrice enacts necessary change, one acknowledged even by Elewa's uncle who represents a more traditional generation in the novel" (p. 15). Beatrice is indeed taking the responsibility of naming the child with respect and confidence. As it were [B]y conducting the ceremony without a male (the ritual's required male presence), Beatrice ensures that traditional customs will endure, but with progressive adjustment" (Singler 2013, p.15). This in itself is Achebe's desire to emphasize gender inclusiveness in carrying out society's affairs for the sake of progress.

Beatrice goes further to give Ikem's child a name that is symbolic and significant. Kanaganayakam (1993) underlines that "[T]he name she suggests - Amaechina (Ama in short) - is, as the characters point out, both masculine and feminine. The subversion of tradition is caused by the symbol of tradition. The ceremony takes place accompanied by a dance that includes Muslim, Christian and African elements" (p. 48). Kalpakh, appreciates the presence of mainstream religions in Kangan during the naming ceremony. He argues that "[M]oreover, the naming-ceremony in the novel may stand for democracy, because all the people in the room give a name to the baby (Elewa and Ikem's baby) together regardless of their sex, religion and colour" (p. 178). Indeed, the religions represented are acknowledged as a crucial component in reestablishing a modern and progressive Kangan.

Even further, Achebe uses the metaphor of Anthills to underscore the importance of women resilience. Simply, they are anthills of savannah. Njoku (2016) equates women to Anthills of savannah that survive the savannah fire "[T]heir presence in the ravaged savannah remains symbolic, ample evidence of history and memory when flora and fauna have all gone" (p. 39) Njoku would further underline the survival of women in patriarchal battles and in

this sees them as custodians of solutions and hope in the society. She reckons that:

Achebe arguments in the novel are that the survivors [women in particular] by accident or design are great manipulators of stringent circumstances and deserve their place in history. He reviews the weaknesses of men in the novel such as Ikem and Chris, who respectively pursue revolution and the quest for justice and sanity in the society recklessly and quixotically. Such approach rips open their vulnerability before their assailants (p. 40)

The men with their bloated egos and lack of political pragmatism has on one hand contributed to their individual failure and on the other caused the political decay in Kangan. Achebe, therefore gives women empowerment to take the roles of men in the society. Njoku (2016) argues that “[A]chebe’s women have the attributes of men and assume roles assigned to men by culture and society” (p. 45). That the women are survivors in the political turmoil prevalent in Kangan is good evidence that they have the resilience and dynamism to rebuild a new Kangan from the ruins their men have left behind.

However, Achebe is not advocating for un-reversible roles after women turn tables for men. Rather he has vacated his earlier position of presenting passive women in his earlier novels like *Things Fall Apart*- where women are seen and not heard. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe abandons male chauvinism and elevates female chauvinism, especially by emphasizing the gender of Elewa’s child (Njoku, 2016, p.46) and its naming led by Beatrice. Rutere (2010) observes, “[T]herefore, Achebe, though belated, has finally portrayed women as being able to transcend the patriarchal order he presented in his pioneer novel, *Things Fall Apart*” (pp.62-63). Nonetheless, Achebe assumes that female chauvinism will moderate male chauvinism to build a stable society that cherishes and upholds gender respect, equality and harmony.

In Achebe’s view, therefore, matriarchy becomes the moderator of the crippling patriarchy. It survives to reconstruct the society and accommodate patriarchy on a level ground as exhibited by Beatrice at the novel’s closure where she presides over the naming ceremony of Ikem’s daughter with an inclusive gender and heterogeneous religion. It is this heterogeneity that Achebe prefers for establishing, nurturing and sustaining the political leadership in Kangan and beyond. A rainbow kind of leadership is the best because there is strength to accomplish anything in society in diversity.

Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* serves as a powerful critique of the destructive nature of patriarchal power and its devastating impact on society. The novel's portrayal of the corrupt and oppressive military regime in

Kangan mirrors the historical and contemporary experiences of many African nations. Through the lens of feminist theory, the novel exposes the gendered dimensions of political oppression, highlighting the marginalization and silencing of women within a male-dominated society. The Kangan state, a microcosm of many African nations, is a cautionary tale of a society plagued by military coups, corruption, and human rights abuses. The novel's portrayal of women, while limited, reveals their resilience and capacity for change and leadership. By highlighting the importance of gender equality and women's leadership, Achebe offers a vision for a more just and equitable future. The novel's ending, with Beatrice presiding over the naming ceremony, symbolizes the potential for women to challenge traditional gender roles and contribute to positive social change. As such, *Anthills of the Savannah* remains a relevant and timely text that continues to inspire critical thinking and social justice activism.

Achebe foresees hope of an accountable and progressive gender inclusive society beyond the regime of people in uniform in Nigeria. Thus, he presents to the reader male and female characters that are visionary in this direction and many a times moderate male egoism, a product of patriarchal excesses in Kangan. Beatrice, Chris's fiancé, is an example of characters that usually come in to reason with men like Chris and Ikem who happen sometimes to differ on issues. For instance, after Sam sexually assaults Beatrice at Abichi, she narrates the ordeal to Chris as she tries to persuade him to sort out his difference with defiant Ikem and where possible save the latter from trouble with state. However, Chris is dismissive and believes Ikem is fanatical and unchangeable. He quips to Beatrice "'[A]nd you are now asking me to go yet again and go on my knees and ask an artist who has the example of Don Quixote and other fictional characters to guide him'" (*Anthills* p. 119). Chris is too condescending and convinced that Ikem is too idealistic and not ready to conform to Kangan political realities for survival. He admits to Beatrice his powerlessness and despair to help his friend and further argues "[Y]ou are asking a man [himself] who has long despaired of fighting to hold back a combatant, fanatical and in full gear. My dear, all he'll ever get for his [Ikem] pains is to be knocked flat on his face" (*Anthills* p. 119). Despite Chris's reluctance to help Ikem, his Childhood friend and contemporary, Beatrice has evidently shown pragmatic concern to initiate a truce between the two men and for the purpose of their careers, which could be beneficial to Kangan if well understood by Sam.

Achebe appreciates women's efforts and agency to bring change in Kangan. He metaphorically expresses this by using the metaphor of "Anthills" and consequently gives the novel the title *Anthills of the Savannah*. The anthills, as argued earlier, survive the fire, which destroys flora and fauna. This

analogy is rightly put because women have resilience, dynamism, and pragmatism to withstand patriarchal excesses in any society. Njoku (2016), in summary, observes that:

In essence, the anthills metaphorically stand for women whose mental elasticity and resilience in times of war and violence that gulp men help to remain behind as survivors and tale bearers. The situation is synonymous with women in the novel (Beatrice, Elewa and Adamma, who must tell the sad story of Ikem Osodi, Chris Oriko, His Excellency, Major Samsonite and Colonel Ossai; who in turn are the victims of the war in the novel, the consequences of dictatorship (p. 40).

Indeed, Njoku's interpretation of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* underlines the anthill as a great metaphor for women's resilience and survival in the face of societal destruction. Just as anthills withstand the fires that destroy their surroundings, the women, especially Beatrice, Elewa, and Adamma, endure the chaos and violence that take the male characters' lives. They act as the essential "history bearers," ensuring that the tragic outcomes of dictatorship are remembered. This literary device underscores Achebe's acknowledgement of women's strength, agency, and their crucial role in preserving memory and helping society rebuild after conflict.

CONCLUSION

Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* serves as a powerful critique of the destructive nature of patriarchal power and its devastating impact on society. The novel's portrayal of the corrupt and oppressive military regime in Kangan mirrors the historical and contemporary experiences of many African nations. Through the lens of feminist theory, the novel exposes the gendered dimensions of political oppression, highlighting the marginalization and silencing of women within a male-dominated society. Achebe's work also serves as a prophetic warning about the dangers of unchecked power and the importance of accountability. The novel's ending, with Beatrice presiding over a non-traditional naming ceremony, symbolizes a hope for a future where women play a more significant role in leadership and decision-making. By challenging traditional gender roles and advocating for greater female participation in politics, Achebe suggests that a more just and equitable society can be achieved.

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