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## Assessing the Dilemma of a Nation at the Crossroads

### Protest as Landscape in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

#### ABSTRACT

This essay interrogates the mediation of protest and literature in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*. It further evaluates the preoccupation of the novel as a veritable record of various forms of protest. Protest and literature are seen to be closely related in the way in which human beings perceive of their society and the actions that they take as a result of those perceptions. Social protest can be said to refer to those mass movements, private initiatives, demonstrations, and other activities which support or oppose specific developments or situations in a given society, with a view to changing it for the better. Literature, for its part, refers to that body of written, verbal, or performed work which exercises the imagination and seeks to offer insights into the nature of the world and the place of humans in it.

#### Introduction

**A**S A CONCEPT, protest is open to a variety of definitions, some of which stand in stark contrast to one another. When protest is considered as a social phenomenon that is ubiquitous in any society, the problems of definition surrounding it become immediately apparent. *Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* defines protest as

a solemn declaration of opinion and [usually] of dissent [...] the act of objecting or a gesture of disapproval [...] organized public demonstration of disapproval [...] a complaint, objection, or display of unwillingness [usually] to an idea or a course of action.

The *Random House Unabridged Dictionary* defines 'protest' in similar terms as "an expression or declaration of objection, disapproval, or dissent, often in opposition to something a person is powerless to prevent or avoid."

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From the two dictionary definitions given above, it can be seen that protest is clearly related to assertive demonstrations of commitment to the continued growth, development, and progress of any society. Protest is the main instrument for the accomplishment of what Paulo Freire calls “the great humanistic and historical task of the oppressed: to liberate themselves and their oppressors as well.”<sup>1</sup> As an expression of opposition or dissent, protest involves an overt response to articulations of power and authority, and assumes the existence of social, political, and economic relationships in which individuals or groups disagree with one another, and go on to express such disagreement in a variety of ways.

In *The Art of Moral Protest*, James M. Jasper defines protest as “explicit criticism of other people, organizations, and the things they believe or do.”<sup>2</sup> He also defines it as “an effort to realize a moral vision.”<sup>3</sup> Protest is open to so many definitions primarily because of its nature. As a social phenomenon, it is virtually omnipresent in human society because it is manifested in any situation in which there is a disagreement of some sort. However, it takes on a variety of forms that are so disparate that the only thing that qualifies them to be called ‘protest’ is the fact that they are usually expressing opposition to a given state of affairs.

Chinua Achebe’s most recent novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, poses new challenges which have to be responded to in new ways. As Lloyd W. Brown points out, Achebe “exposed the narrowness or irrelevance of Western perceptions of African traditions” in novels such as *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, and “underscores the limitations of traditional African values vis-à-vis the Western criteria of twentieth century modernity” in works such as *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*.<sup>4</sup> In *Anthills of the Savannah*, however, society has reached an ambivalent stage in which the issues identified in the previous eras have mutated into a crisis which encompasses the difficul-

<sup>1</sup> Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982): 21.

<sup>2</sup> James M. Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest: Culture, Biography and Creativity in Social Movements* (Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1997): 5.

<sup>3</sup> Jasper, *The Art of Moral Protest*, 9.

<sup>4</sup> Lloyd W. Brown, “Cultural Norms and Modes of Perception in Achebe’s Fiction” (1972), in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, ed. C.L. Innes & Bernth Lindfors (Washington DC: Three Continents, 1978): 35.

ties and tensions of those eras, in addition to the problems that are peculiar to it.

To varying degrees, protest has always been present in literature, but in African literature, it finds deep resonance in the continent's tortured history:

The tradition of protest in African literature may [...] be said to have its roots in the general crusade against the Slave Trade [...]. Although slavery was abolished at the beginning of the nineteenth century, the relationship between the African and the European remained substantially unchanged [...]. The process of decolonization, which in reality is colonialism by other means, or further colonisation [...] is now in the final stages of completion.<sup>5</sup>

Achebe's long and distinguished sojourn in the world of letters may be regarded as one long protest against behaviour, attitudes and modes of thinking that he considers antithetical to the development of Africa and its people. He has explicitly stated the view that protest is integral to modern African literature, and therefore cannot be divorced from it: "I believe it's impossible to write anything in Africa without some kind of commitment, some kind of message, some kind of protest."<sup>6</sup> Protest is inherent within Achebe because, as he himself says, it is part of his "deep-rooted need to alter things within that situation, to find for myself a little more room than has been allowed me in the world."<sup>7</sup> In his different works, he has shown that he is an expert practitioner when it comes to protest. Adebayo Williams states:

His philippic on the failure of leadership in Nigeria, *The Trouble With Nigeria* (1982), remains a classic of the genre, and his terse rebuke of the Nigerian press is as memorable as it is forthright. When he is cross, Achebe can be pithy and pitiless.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> S.E. Ogude, "African Literature and the Burden of History: Some Reflections" (1991), in *African Literature and African Historical Experience*, ed. Chidi Ikonné, Emeilia Oko & Peter Onwudinjo (Ibadán: Heinemann Educational, 1991): 5.

<sup>6</sup> Kolawole Ogunbesan, Ogunbesan, Kolawole. "Politics and the African Writer" (1973), in *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe*, ed. C.L. Innes & Bernth Lindfors (Washington DC: Three Continents, 1978): 40.

<sup>7</sup> Simon Gikandi, *Reading Chinua Achebe: Language and Ideology in Fiction* (London: James Currey, 1991): 19.

<sup>8</sup> Adebayo Williams, "The Autumn of the Literary Patriarch: Chinua Achebe and the Politics of Remembering," *Research in African Literatures* 32.3 (Autumn 2001): 9.

Redemptive severity of this kind stems from the fact that writers possess what Wole Soyinka calls

an array of unholy words with which to rephrase or reinterpret, for the purposes of demystification, even passages from the same scriptures that seemingly encrypt the doctrine of conformism or female subservience. They embrace a morality that compels them to challenge the authority of the fatal interpreter of the divine word.<sup>9</sup>

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe protests eurocentric notions of precolonial Africa as barbaric and unenlightened; in *No Longer at Ease*, he protests the corruption and moral degeneration of a nation that was already failing to live up to its ideals soon after independence; in *Arrow of God*, he pillories the jealousy, intrigue, and lack of dynamism that made indigenous African societies all the more vulnerable to the pressures of colonialism, Christianity, and Western education; in *A Man of the People*, he protests against the venality and corruption of leadership, as well as the passiveness of the citizenry that made socio-political chaos inevitable. *Anthills of the Savannah* seems to represent a fitting culmination to a lifetime of literary commitment, weaving together as it does many of the diverse strands of his earlier novels and turning them into a comprehensive and far-reaching examination of a people's response to societal challenges. As Ezenwa-Ohaeto, his biographer, states, Achebe regards *Anthills of the Savannah* as "a summation of both his vision and the different strands of his novels."<sup>10</sup>

When *Anthills of the Savannah* is considered in relation to the issue of protest, it will be seen that the novel demonstrates the ambivalence, ambiguity, and complexity that are the hallmark of the most memorable literary approaches to the phenomenon of protest. Such features can be seen in the very title of the book, the clearest reference to which in the text is found in the following passage:

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<sup>9</sup> Wole Soyinka, "A Voice that Would Not be Silenced" (2001), in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2007): 142.

<sup>10</sup> Ezenwa-Ohaeto, *Chinua Achebe: A Biography* (1997; Ìbàdàn: Heinemann Educational, 2000): 242.

The trees had become hydra-headed bronze statues so ancient that only blunt residual features remained on their faces, like *anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year's bush fires*.<sup>11</sup>

As described by Achebe, anthills are “survivors” whose very presence is supposed to bear testimony to the occurrence of traumatic events in the past. In other words, the landscape is itself attesting to the presence of suffering and distress. From this perspective, therefore, anthills are, for Achebe, a reminder, a testimony, and by extension, an objection and a gesture of defiance. In essence, anthills are symbolic and literal manifestations of protest.

Kolawole Ogungbesan has traced the evolution of Achebe’s perception of the writer’s role in African society from that of a teacher and guide whose purpose is to help people regain their lost dignity, to the embodiment of social consciousness who must point out the evils being perpetrated in newly independent societies by the indigenes on themselves, to the radical seer who must help envision meaningful change. Ogungbesan identifies each of these phases as corresponding to events going on in Nigeria at specific times and which were reflected in Achebe’s literary output. Thus, the teacher’s role was necessary in the run-up to independence and immediately after, and was reflected in *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*; the role of the social conscience became relevant in the post-independence era, and was manifested in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*; the radical visionary’s role was inspired by the Nigerian crises and its subsequent civil war, and is reflected mainly in his poetry and in the lectures and speeches he delivered during this period.

Although Ogungbesan goes on to say that Achebe’s various roles ultimately become contradictory rather than evolutionary because he did not attain the critical detachment that was vital to creativity during the civil war, the categories he isolates are useful in making the argument that Achebe combines all these prior roles in *Anthills of the Savannah*. In the novel, Achebe is simultaneously teacher, social conscience, and radical visionary. History, contemporary social commentary, and pragmatic models of social action are all merged in an ambitious work which brings all of his long-held views together. The novel seeks to answer many of the questions that were ostensibly left unanswered in previous works, such as the meaning of Ikemefuna’s murder and Okonkwo’s suicide in *Things Fall Apart*; Obika’s death and Ezeulu’s mad-

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<sup>11</sup> Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988; Ibadàn: Heinemann Educational, 1999): 31. (Emphasis added).

ness in *Arrow of God*; Odili's real motivation in *A Man of the People*; and Obi's true loyalties in *No Longer at Ease*. The way in which he does this is simplicity itself. Each of the above incidents represents an unvoiced protest against the overwhelming oppressiveness of a given situation: in *Anthills of the Savannah*, the death, madness, and emotional insecurity of the earlier novels will be overcome by the simple expedient of speaking out, by ensuring that one's peculiar circumstances, no matter how difficult, do not result in the silencing of one's voice. Protest is the means by which Achebe gathers all the important strands of his previous thinking together, and it is also the medium through which he expresses them.

Achebe's unique approach to protest is shaped by his long-standing discomfort with conventional or insufficiently examined approaches to the delineation of social issues in literature. As Simon Gikandi maintains, his ideological standpoints are characterized by a persistent unwillingness to follow the well-trodden path: "ideology as process and critique, rather than product and dogma, is the key to understanding Achebe's narrative strategies."<sup>12</sup>

Achebe's relatively non-controversial approach to the portrayal of contemporary African society stands in sharp contrast to the overtly political commitment demanded of the continent's writers by Marxist authors and critics. Talking about the role of African writers in the 1980s, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o predicted a complete integration of the committed writer into the anti-imperialist struggle to in such a way that s/he would become virtually indistinguishable from the masses themselves:

as the struggle continues and intensifies, the lot of the writer in a neo-colonial state will become harder and not easier [...]. the African writer of the eighties, the one who opts for becoming an integral part of the African revolution, has no choice but that of aligning himself with the people: their economic, political and cultural struggle for survival [...]. He must be part of the song the people sing as once again they take up arms to smash the neo-colonial state to complete the anti-imperialist national democratic revolution they had started in the fifties, and even earlier.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Gikandi, *Reading Chimua Achebe*, 12.

<sup>13</sup> Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "Writing Against Neo-Colonialism" (1986), in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2007): 164.

Given the kind of work he has produced over the years, Achebe would accept this prescription, but only to an extent. He understands that the writer's difficulties will increase, and will concede that a closer relationship between the writer and society are desirable. Indeed, these are viewpoints that he long advocated before they became prevalent in his critical writings. However, a point of contention arises over the exact nature of the writer's identification with the people. Achebe has always valued aesthetic distance as vital to the independence that is essential to artistic integrity, and the total immersion in the popular causes of the nature Ngũgĩ suggests would not sit comfortably with him. In fact, such a close integration into such supposed "people's struggles" could actually blur the distinctions between writer and audience to the extent that the former would become unrecognizable. As shall be seen later in this essay, Achebe does seek ways in which writers can identify with the masses, but he chooses to find ways which ensure that it is a sincere gesture, rather than political or ideological posturing.

In any case, the writer's unique position in relation to that of society also makes it necessary for him to stand a little apart from it. As Soyinka claims,

the writer is the visionary of his people, he recognizes past and present not for the purpose of enshrinement but for the local creative glimpses and statement of the ideal future. He anticipates; he warns. It is not always enough for the writer to be involved in the direct political struggle of today, he often cannot help but envisage and seek to protect the future which is the declared aim of the contemporary struggle.<sup>14</sup>

Like most writers in Africa, Achebe labours under the weight of huge popular expectations. It is widely believed that literary writings must offer practical solutions to social problems if they are to be considered relevant. Njabulo S. Ndebele states:

One accusation that has often been levelled at writers, particularly in those countries hungry for radical change, is that many of them have not offered solutions to the problems they may have graphically revealed. It seems [...]

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<sup>14</sup> Soyinka, in paper delivered at the UNESCO Conference on "The Influence of Colonialism on the Artist, his Milieu and his Public in Developing Countries" (Dar-es-Salaam, Tanzania, July 1971), quoted in Emmanuel N. Obiechina, *Language and Theme: Essays on African Literature* (1990; Ìbàdàn: Heinemann Educational, 1993): 122.

this accusation has been based on a set of premises by which the nature of the relationship between art and society could never be adequately disclosed. More often than not, the accusation has been presented on the demand that artists produce works that will incite people to political action, something which, most people will agree, is strictly speaking, the task of the professional propagandist.<sup>15</sup>

The burden of relevance becomes even heavier when critics like Kemi Kuku argues that increasingly intractable difficulties in Nigerian society have caused the country's authors to become expressly revolutionary in their work:

Recently, the Nigerian writer has assumed a new role which is that of a revolutionary. The social, political and economic situation has necessitated a more revolutionary approach to criticism. Having played the role of moralist, saviour and prophet of doom to no avail, the Nigerian writer has decided to initiate the direction towards which the people should move.<sup>16</sup>

It is clear that Kuku is talking about revolutions of the sort usually seen in Marxist rhetoric.

While it can be conceded that many Nigerian writers will have adapted their work to meet the new realities of the contemporary situation, it is doubtful that Achebe could be properly classified in such a 'revolutionary' group. He is interested in revolution, but it is more of a deep ethical change than a political transformation. Besides, commitment of the kind Kuku suggests is always subordinate to the writer's own interests:

Engagement or political commitment does not pre-determine what a writer's politics should be, it merely demands the writer write in such ways as might advance the interests and purposes he espouses.<sup>17</sup>

As the person who famously declared that the novelist performed the role of teacher in African societies, Achebe has always produced works whose overt

<sup>15</sup> Njabulo S. Ndebele, "Redefining Relevance" (1989), in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2007): 128.

<sup>16</sup> Kemi Kuku, "The Nigerian Writer and Social Awareness," in *The Humanities and National Development in Nigeria*, ed. E.A. Erubetina & Nina Mba (Lagos: Nelson, 1991): 143.

<sup>17</sup> Chinweizu, Onwuchekwa Jemie & Ihechukwu Madubuike, *Toward the Decolonization of African Literature*, vol. 1 (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980): 254.

aim is to educate and enlighten the reader: *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* instil awareness about Africa's past; *No Longer at Ease* raises consciousness about the destructive consequences of improperly-digested alien values; *A Man of the People* exposes the corruption and incompetence that had stifled progress in Nigeria. However, as Richard K. Priebe points out, Achebe's desire to teach through his writing is much more sophisticated than at first seems apparent: "Achebe's works are didactic, but not in the manner of a facile, two-dimensional realism whose ethical choices are clear-cut."<sup>18</sup> This sophisticated, multi-dimensional realism is brought to bear on Achebe's portrayal of protest in *Anthills of the Savannah*. The novel has explicit didactic aims, many of which relate to the nature of protest, but they are depicted in such a way as to accurately reflect the ambivalent nature of protest, and the compromises and false starts that characterise its manifestation in fallible human beings in a society that is itself far from perfect.

Achebe is unusual among African writers in his possession of an unquenchable faith in his society's ability to make real progress, while still being able to take a hard look at the failures and shortcomings that continue to frustrate the laudable project of nation-building. As he tells Robert Serumaga in a 1967 interview,

if it were for me to order society I would be very unhappy about the way things have turned out. But again, I see this as the way life is. Every society has to grow up, every society has to learn its own lessons, so I don't despair.<sup>19</sup>

It is this mix of patient tolerance and tough-minded pragmatism that he brings to bear on *Anthills of the Savannah*. It shapes his attitude to the society that he portrays in the novel and, by extension, the way protest is depicted in it. This is yet another reason why Achebe is so wary of conventional or 'popular' approaches to the depiction of protest in literature, regardless of whether it is from the perspective of style, content, or method. Instead, he chooses to let protest emerge as a natural response to the ambiguous, albeit clearly depressing, circumstances which have given rise to it. Achebe's insistence that the challenges of Africa are too complex to be solved entirely by conventional

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<sup>18</sup> Richard K. Priebe, *Myth, Realism and the African Writer* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1988): 48.

<sup>19</sup> Achebe, in *African Writers Talking*, ed. Dennis Duerden & Cosmo Pieterse (1972; London: Heinemann Educational, 1975): 13.

approaches can also be seen in his belief that “we should not be bent on the one-solution approach. Africa is not a one-solution continent. We are not a one-issue continent.”<sup>20</sup>

Part of the reason why Achebe’s approach to the issues of protest in *Anthills of the Savannah* is so multi-dimensional is that it is because he is dealing with contemporary history, analysing unfolding events which are taking place in the here-and-now, as opposed to the there-and-then. Moral principles and ethical attitudes may be relatively fixed and unchanging, but the social context in which they are to be applied is so fluid that any attempt to express those principles and attitudes through protest must be adaptable to the fast-changing realities on the ground. Joseph Swann identifies the novel’s essential ambiguity:

History is not, as it was in *Things Fall Apart*, there in the past to be known and told about: it comes into being in the minds and feelings of those involved in it. It is the product of the words which form it. That, I think, is why there is no fixed standpoint in *Anthills of the Savannah*, no single storyteller and no single story: the face of history has become a crowd snapshot, with its own very real claim to objectivity [...]. *Anthills of the Savannah* is involved in the genesis of history. What takes place here does so inside the characters who tell their story. They, mentally and emotionally, are struggling to find guidelines through the morass of violence and fear which has taken the place of corruption in their society.<sup>21</sup>

Achebe’s notion of protest is influenced by his perception of it as being essentially moral rather than basically ideological. In his novels and essays, he has clearly shown his impatience with the political posturing, name-calling and labelling which all too often pass for protest and political commitment in African literature. Thus, the principle and altruism that are supposed to be the basic underpinnings of protest are obscured by political pomposity and affectation, dogmatic prescription and downright abuse, which in his view do little either to properly locate the cause of protest or to identify the ways in which it can ensure social progress. This is why it is possible to read *Anthills of the Savannah* as a sustained meditation on the nature of protest. Achebe carefully considers the multifarious forms it takes, the differing circumstances that pro-

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<sup>20</sup> Ezenwa-Ohaeto, *Chinua Achebe: A Biography*, 254.

<sup>21</sup> Steven R. Serafin, *Modern Black Writers: Supplement* (New York: Continuum, 1996): 7.

voke it, the many guises it assumes, and its ultimate inevitability as a response to intolerable situations of oppression and injustice.

Adewale Maja-Pearce claims that *Anthills of the Savannah* does not seek an answer to why African governments such as that in charge of the Republic of Kangan treat their citizens with so much contempt, and why the citizens themselves actually seem to expect to be treated in such a high-handed manner, instead of resolutely opposing it:

If successive leaders are able to shirk their responsibilities and turn themselves into Life Presidents the better to brutalise the society further, it is only because the brutalised themselves collude in the endeavour.<sup>22</sup>

In a similar vein, Bernth Lindfors states that “one of the central questions raised in the course of the narrative – ‘What must a people do to appease an embittered history?’ – remains unanswered.”<sup>23</sup> Many of the novel’s characters, Maja-Pearce says, are guilty of a “naïve romanticism”<sup>24</sup> that they seem to think is a shortcoming to be found only in the so-called masses: Ikem and Beatrice, in particular, are guilty of making romantic analyses of the problems facing society. However, when *Anthills of the Savannah* is considered from the perspective of protest, it will be seen that what Maja-Pearce sees as romanticism is actually an aspect of the tortuous path these characters must follow as they gradually overcome deficiencies in their own personalities and come to realize the true nature of the problems confronting them, and the consequent need to protest strenuously against it. In other words, it is one of the literary strategies adopted by Achebe in depicting protest in the novel.

### Strategies of Protest in *Anthills of the Savannah*

Unlike other novels where the manifestation of protest is obvious, protest in *Anthills of the Savannah* appears to be an extremely multifaceted phenomenon. It can be seen in various ways: the multiple-narration method which enables the reader to see both the strengths and the weaknesses of the major

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<sup>22</sup> Adewale Maja-Pearce, *A Mask Dancing: Nigerian Novelists of the Eighties* (London: Hans Zell, 1992): 167.

<sup>23</sup> Bernth Lindfors, “Achebe’s Escort Service,” in Lindfors, *African Textualities: Texts, Pre-Texts and Contexts of African Literature* (Trenton NJ: Africa World Press, 1992): 9.

<sup>24</sup> Maja-Pearce, *A Mask Dancing*, 166.

characters; the various vignettes in which Achebe exposes the class-based ignorance and social assumptions of different individuals; the choice of oblique protest over overt protest; his always characteristic and extensive use of myth, folktale, and proverb; the way in which he conflates protest with personal growth.

The above strategies ensure that protest is as ubiquitous as the landscape that defines the setting of the novel, and becomes virtually atmospheric in its near-omniscience. Dictatorial leaders and corrupt government officials are not criticized directly, but are portrayed in such a manner that they actually seem to condemn themselves, as it were. No character is allowed to assume a holier-than-thou attitude, either, as all are subject to sustained interrogation of their behaviour and attitudes, by themselves and by others. The novel is interspersed with moral fables or parables which sum up prevailing situations and contemporary attitudes in a way almost nothing else can. These elements are essential parts of Achebe's overall strategy of reconfiguring protest by ridding it of the ideological posturing, intellectual dishonesty, and mental laziness that have tarnished it and thereby made it part of the problem instead of part of the solution that it is supposed to be. They will be discussed in turn, as their importance to Achebe's portrayal of protest is now examined in detail.

### Multiple Narration

Simon Gikandi observes that "Achebe's works are all experimental in nature: narrative strategies are shaped by the author's need to experiment with different forms of representation."<sup>25</sup> *Anthills of the Savannah* clearly demonstrates this experimental penchant, and it resembles Joseph Conrad's *Nostramo* and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood*, which depict "a complex of interfused confessions emanating from the dramatic actions of characters who are caught in a crucial historical moment."<sup>26</sup> *Anthills of the Savannah* is in a significant way reflective of a modernist consciousness, in which the literary artist is much less certain of the stability of social institutions than he used to be, and produces texts which reflect such anxieties and misgivings. Achebe, ordinarily, would not be regarded as falling into this category; indeed, he is famous for his excoriation of the Ghanaian novelist Ayi Kwei Armah for

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<sup>25</sup> Gikandi, *Reading Chimua Achebe*, 16.

<sup>26</sup> David Kerr, *The African Novel and the Modernist Tradition* (New York: Peter Lang, 1997): 8.

utilizing such a modernist consciousness in his depiction of Ghana.<sup>27</sup> However, such is the desperate nature of the situation that Africa finds itself in that Achebe has no choice but to deploy the tools that can best approximate harsh realities.

*Anthills of the Savannah* is told from a number of different viewpoints, including those of the Kangan Commissioner for Information, Chris Oriko; the editor of the leading newspaper, the *National Gazette*, Ikem Osodi; and Beatrice Okoh, a senior civil servant. In addition to these perspectives, there is a limited third-person narrative with Free Indirect Discourse. This narrative method is a more sophisticated version of a technique which Achebe had used to great effect in *A Man of the People*, where, as Emmanuel Obiechina says,

we find a complex picture in which the point of view shifts rapidly between identification and dissociation, between the author's seeing things through the eye of the major character-narrator and standing aside to take a critical look at the narrator, a feat made possible by the author's imaginative nimbleness in moving between moral positions.<sup>28</sup>

Most analyses of this use of multiple narration point to the fact that it is being used for the first time in a sustained way in Achebe's oeuvre, and go on to discuss its relevance to the novel's themes. From the particular perspective of this study, however, it is argued that Achebe's use of multiple narrators actually helps to underscore the novel's status as an extended meditation on the nature of protest. This can be seen in a number of ways.

The first is that Achebe's use of multiple narrators clearly demonstrates the multi-dimensional nature of protest, regardless of how it is conceived. Chris, Ikem and Beatrice are all protesting the incompetence, corruption, and injustice that surround them, but they all manifest such protest in different ways. Chris sees himself as the observer who charts the degeneration and perversion of noble ideals; Ikem is the Jeremiah who speaks truth to power; Beatrice is the portrait of the ideal citizen whose exceptionality is a demonstration of what the nation can achieve if its house were in order. They are all in agree-

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<sup>27</sup> Achebe, "Africa and Her Writers" (1973), in Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day: Essays* (London: Heinemann Educational, 1975): 19–29.

<sup>28</sup> Emmanuel N. Obiechina, "Background to the West African Novel" (1975), in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2007): 327.

ment that the country is on a dangerous path and is beset by rising social, political, and economic tensions, but they all protest the dire situation in their own individual ways.

Related to this is the way in which the novel's employment of multiple narration enables Achebe to refract protest by showing how it is capable of taking on different meanings when it is viewed from different perspectives. When Ikem is seen through the eyes of Chris early in Chapter Three, he is portrayed as a rash, intemperate man who seems to be incapable of thinking before he acts: "Chris was smiling a mirthless smile. An angry man is always a stupid man" (27). To Ikem, however, it is Chris who is illogical and detached from national realities: "Amazing what even one month in office can do to a man's mind [...]. To think that Chris no longer understands such logic!" (38). Both men view themselves as committed patriots who genuinely wish to change the situation in the country, yet when their actions are viewed through the eyes of others, their behaviour seem to be irrational and counter-productive.

Achebe's use of the multiple-narrative mode also enables him to concretely demonstrate and thereby reinforce his notion of the pre-eminence of stories and storytellers, and the way in which both are intricately intertwined with protest. None of the novel's main characters has all the facts with which to provide a comprehensive picture of the issues at stake: each must tell his or her own part of the story, as it were, so that the others can complement it with additional information and perspectives. As Chris says, "We are all connected. You cannot tell the story of any of us without implicating the others" (66). In a similar manner, protest is a story that cannot be told by just one person, because it is a intricate, multilayered, interwoven tapestry whose richness and vitality stems from the ability of others to contribute to it. It is significant in this regard that Beatrice's most effective way of protesting the tragedies that beset her is to take up the thread of narration from where the now-deceased Chris and Ikem have dropped it and to ensure that it is not forgotten, misappropriated or distorted: she claims to have "definitely taken on the challenge of bringing together as many broken pieces of this tragic history" (82).

### Vignettes

Like many of Achebe's other novels, *Anthills of the Savannah* is full of vignettes, which can be defined as tales told by characters or by the author which may further illuminate a particular situation or describe an important

aspect of national life and social conditions, or dramatize a salient issue that had hitherto manifested itself on only a theoretical level. In the novel, such vignettes or sketches include the story of the forays of the forbearing wrestling champion, His Excellency, into oral sex, the murderously indifferent soldier in the market, and the tortoise that was about to die. Stories are meant to educate and entertain. They are a significant medium of enculturation, they serve to transmit cherished values, and sanction those who deviate from them. As the medium through which these stories are given expression, storytellers are held in high regard: they are, in fact, the custodians of the communal imagination, privileged persons entrusted with the important task of explaining a society to itself.

Almost like Biblical parables, these stories encapsulate prevalent modes of behaviour in a way that almost nothing else can. For example, the soldier who contemptuously tells the trader he almost knocks down that his life is worth no more than a dog's enacts a ritual of self-indictment that is so conclusive that he does not need to be condemned or confronted by either Ikem, who witnesses the incident, or by the trader he nearly kills.

In other words, the vignette is a form of self-generating protest: protest does not arise from reactions to an unjust or inequitable situation, but from the very situation itself. A similar theory can be observed in the story of the tortoise that was about to die. Even though he knows that he is about to succumb to a far more superior force, he is still insistent on re-interpreting the context of his death in such a way as to convey meanings that transcend the humiliation of defeat and even the finality of death. When this is applied to protest, Achebe appears to be saying that human beings can only be victims of circumstance if they allow themselves to be perceived as such because it is in their power to re-interpret their particular predicament in such a way that they can reject its implications. Such rejection is at the heart of the self-sustaining kind of protest that Achebe seeks to highlight in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

These vignettes are also important in the way in which they help to focus attention on the story as the real locus of protest, as opposed to physical action, which is too easily tainted by self-interest and bad faith. By concentrating on the kernel of action and reaction, hope and fear, ideals and reality, these vignettes show that the true essence of protest lies in its essentially moral stand, the notion that whatever is perceived as being harmful to the progress of society should be properly identified as such, instead of being tolerated or countenanced. As Nadine Gordimer claims, "Morals have bedded with

story-telling since the magic of the imaginative capacity developed in the human brain.”<sup>29</sup> These vignettes, in their very artlessness, ribaldry, and folksiness, reconfigure the very purpose of protest by de-emphasizing the political in favour of the human context, which is more fundamental. They reiterate the moral perspective which is the true basis of protest, and thereby cleanse it of the irrelevant accretions of ideology, ambition, and other short-term interests that often cloud other manifestations of resistance.

### The Contestation of Meanings

In considering the nature of protest in *Anthills of the Savannah*, it is apparent that Achebe considers all protest as essentially the contestation of meanings. The disagreements between His Excellency and people such as Chris, Ikem, Beatrice, and the others over the direction of Kangan stem from their differing perceptions of how the country can best make progress: the former believe in an authoritarian, top-down approach because they feel they have all the answers; the latter argue that such an approach has failed, and must give way to more inclusive approaches that take the ordinary citizen into greater consideration.

The novel is replete with disagreements and arguments, to such an extent that the narrative is a virtual war of wills. The book opens with Chris and His Excellency, with their eyes combatively locked in a dangerous outward manifestation of a personality-clash. Ikem engages a taxi-driver in a grim battle for a few inches of space in a traffic jam, and argues with Elewa over the necessity of her going home in the dead of night; Chris and Ikem argue over the latter’s editorial comments. Beatrice engages a female American journalist over her seemingly inappropriate behaviour towards His Excellency, and quarrels with Chris over his seeming lack of concern for her well-being. Ikem has a brush with a traffic policeman over alleged illegal parking. Ikem turns his lecture at the university into a dialogue so that he and his audience can “exchange a few blows” (154).

These disagreements run the gamut from the trivial to the very serious, but what unites them is the way in which they all involve a struggle over meanings. Individuals come into conflict with one another based on their perceived

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<sup>29</sup> Nadine Gordimer, “Three in a Bed: Fiction, Morals, and Politics” (1991), in *African Literature: An Anthology of Criticism and Theory*, ed. Tejumola Olaniyan & Ato Quayson (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2007): 115.

understanding of an issue, and it is the contesting interpretations that are the basis of protest. This is the reason why it is that Chris and Ikem, who can claim to understand His Excellency better than anyone else, are the ones who ultimately oppose him so implacably. Throughout the novel, both men, along with Mad Medico, try to draw upon what they know about His Excellency in an effort to understand how he has become the person he now is. For his part, His Excellency feels betrayed by his old friends: “He said he was deeply wounded that we, his oldest friends, found it possible to abandon him and allow him to be disgraced” (147), Chris reports.

Part of the contestation of meanings in the novel takes place on the level of social class and occupation. Ikem’s stubborn desire to maintain a low profile in spite of his enviable status as editor of a major newspaper is seen by himself as a rejection of the crass materialism of Kangan society and a demonstration of his determination to remain true to himself, but the taxi-driver he has an encounter with re-interprets it as the unedifying miserliness of a man who is too selfish to give employment to those who desperately need it. Perhaps the most explicit argument over meanings is that triggered by the murderous soldier who nearly runs over a trader in the market:

‘Does he mean that after killing me he will go and kill a dog?’

‘No, he means that to kill you is like to kill a dog.’

‘So therefore you na dog ... Na dog born you.’

But the victim stuck to his far more imaginative interpretation. ‘No,’ he said again. ‘If I kill you I kill dog means that after he kill me he will go home and kill his dog.’ (48)

It is interesting that this disagreement takes place on a secondary level: namely, that of exactly what the soldier meant by his contemptuous retort, rather than questioning the propriety of the soldier’s behaviour. Achebe seems to be making the point that since protest is essentially about the contestation of meanings, the meanings that are open to such contestation should be properly identified so that the resultant contestations are not misdirected or meaningless.

Achebe’s concern with the importance attached to meanings can be seen in the profusion of wordplay, such as “Mandingauls” (38); mischievous double entendres which combine the innocuous and the ribald, such as Chris’s unwitting advice to Beatrice to “keep all options open” (73) on her visit to the Presidential Retreat; and the reversal of apparently stable meanings, such as

Ikem's "impending *coup d'état* [...] against this audience and its stereotype notions of struggle" (153).

## Conclusion

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Chinua Achebe attempts to draw together many of the ideas and opinions that were evident in his previous novels. As a result of this, the novel displays a depth of meaning which influences all of its major themes, including protest. Thus, instead of depicting protest in ways that have become conventional in African literature, Achebe chooses to examine it in a much more authentic context. Protest is therefore seen to be much more problematical and complicated in the novel than at first seems to be evident.

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