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# Achebe as A Born-Again Novelist: A Study of His Portrayal of African Woman in Contemporary Political Struggle in *Anthills of The Savannah*.

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**Abstract:** Albert Chinualumogu Achebe was best known for his portrayal of traditional African life as it clashes with white men (colonial masters). He was also known for his neglect of female characters' role in most of his novels. In this paper, attempt has been made to show his 'turn back' from the earlier position of assigning women an inferior status in his novels. This is done in the light of *Anthills of the Savannah* where the dominant female character, Beatrice, is portrayed as a symbol of the new women – educated, full of potentials and credentials. Hence, Achebe with a new voice and thought. The paper concludes with explanation on the two sets of female characters in Achebe's novels. The earlier novels reflected women as inferior and weak while in the novel analysed, the female characters represented by Beatrice, are portrayed with full potentials like their male counterparts. This is what makes the novelist a born-again.

**Keywords:** Anthills of the Savannah, Beatrice, colonial masters, turn back.

## INTRODUCTION

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe was born in 1930 in the eastern part of Nigeria. A prominent Ibo and by extension African novelist, Achebe was acclaimed for his unbiased depictions of the social, historical and psychological disorientations that go with imposition of western customs and traditions upon traditional African society. Again, he is popularly taken to be the founding father of modern African novel and literature in general. His earlier novels, *Things Fall Apart* [1] and *Arrow of God* [2] present traditional Ibo (representing Africa) life as it clashes with white men in the form of missionaries and colonial powers.

And *No Longer at Ease* [3] and *A Man of the People* [4] concern corruption and other segments of post colonial African society.

Thus, all these novels, and the novels of some other African male writers such as Ngugi Wathi'ong'o, Sembene Ousmane and Nuraddeen Farah, Ayi Kwei Amah, prompted the reaction of female writers against the inadequate and stereotyped depiction of womanhood in male dominated novels.

However, the aim of this paper is to present Achebe's new voice on the role of the woman in the contemporary political struggle as against his earlier voice about their role. Perhaps a change of mind, may be a new thinking; probably, a realisation that his portrayal of the woman folk in his earlier novels was biased.

For example, Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart* [1] represents the traditional African society. The novel clearly depicts the status of women in Ibo society. The main male – female relationship in the novel centers on Okonkwo and his three wives. We are told that Okonkwo ruled his household with a heavy hand. His wives, especially the youngest lived in perpetual fear of his fiery temper, and so did the little children (P 9).

His action is as a result of his belief that:

No matter how prosperous a man was, if he was unable to rule his women and children (and especially his women) he was not really a man. (P 37)

The reason for assigning women an inferior status is because the Ibo society is a man's world where women are voiceless and defenceless.

### Operational Definition of Born Again

The paper will be guided by the Encarta Dictionaries: Encarta Premium (2009) XISO which defines born again, as somebody who has been recently converted to a cause or an idea. (Emphasis Mine). We believe that Achebe has of recent, identified himself with the creation of a new African woman as shall be proved below in *Anthills of the Savannahs*.

However, Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* [5] which was published after about twenty years from the years of his first publication has a clearly new

different role for a woman in the post colonial Africa. The woman is no longer a liability but capable independently of dealing with the circumstances she finds herself in. The dominant female character in the novel is a symbol of the new African woman. Beatrice was well planned by Achebe. He realized that she has to be well educated to have her freedom as opposed to what was obtained in his previous writings on the depiction of women.

In an interview with Lewis Nkosi in Bada [6], Achebe gives insight in to what he wants to achieve through the creation of the new African woman in contemporary political struggle in the person of a female character, Beatrice.

According to him,

"In mapping out in detail what a woman's role is going to be, I am aware that radical new thinking is required. The quality of compassion and humanness, which the woman brings to the world generally, has not been given scope up till now to influence the way the world is run. We have created all kinds of myths to support the suppression of the women and what the group around Beatrice is saying is that time has come to put an end to that, I am saying that the woman herself will be in the forefront in designing what her new role is going to be, with the humble cooperation of men. The position of Beatrice as a sensitive leader of that group is indicative of what I see as necessary in the transition to the kind of society, which I think we should be aiming to create".

The above can convincingly make us see Achebe as a born-again novelist. Achebe with new voice. Achebe as a new thinker. Achebe as a feminist (?). This is because we have heard the above from the horse's mouth. And like the Hausa people say, waka a bakin mai ita, tafi dadi (A song sung by its composer is sweeter).

Thus, with this intention in mind, Achebe's dominant female character, Beatrice was created in such a way that she could measure up side by side with her male counterparts. She was responsible for what ever actions she wants to perform. The full name of the female character is Beatrice Nwanyibuife Okoh popularly called 'B' of B. B Nwanyibuife ('Buife' for short) means 'a female is also something' arising from the fact that she is the fifth child in a row, born when her mother was in desperate need to give her husband a male child. This therefore, explains Beatrice's hatred for the name especially, Nwanyi, the female part of it (P 87).

Beatrice recalls her earliest memories as 'a little girl completely wrapped up in her own little world, a world contained like Russian dolls, inside the close-fitting world of our mission – house, itself enclosed snugly within the world of the Anglican Church Compound (P 84). From an early age, Beatrice was conscious of the role her parents prepared for her, but was not ready to accept it. In fact, a new female character created by the new Achebe. The opportunity she was waiting for came when she went to Britain for her education. Her determination for getting for herself the self confidence and sense of freedom she needed to fit into her home environment, was evident by her graduating from the Queen Mary College University, London, with a first class honors in English.

The novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, was set in a post-independence West African state of Kangan. The setting draws a close resemblance to contemporary Nigeria. The republic of Kangan has four provinces with Bassa, located in the south, while draught-stricken Abazon one of the provinces in the northwest proved to be constant source of violent opposition to the military regime.

A moving drama of love and friendship, betrayal and death, the novel involved three close friends and former schoolmates, in the characters of Sam, Ikem and Chris. They later found themselves in different but related positions in the country's political terrains. The trio has met one another some twenty-five years earlier, as new boys of thirteen or fourteen years at Lord Lugard College (P 12), one of the Prestigious Secondary Schools in Kangan that produce the cream of the society. Sam is now His Excellency, the Military Head of State; Chris the Commissioner of Information, while Ikem is the editor of the government newspaper. The National Gazette which was earlier on edited by Chris before his latest appointment.

Beatrice's ability to relate with the three main characters in the novel was not in doubt right from the start. The entire three have different views of this woman, Chris sees her as "a good and tastefully produced book, easy on the eye, no pretensions distractions, absolutely sound. A perfect embodiment of my ideal woman, beautiful without being glamorous, peaceful but very strong (P 63-64). to Ikem on the other hand, she was "a reincarnation of the priestess Idemeli". While Sam only looks at her as a convenient sexual object to be used whenever the need arose.

However, Sam's assumption of Beatrice was proved wrong when the opportunity for him to achieve his desire came during a party she was invited in his guest house. Instead, Beatrice seized the opportunity to blast him on his careless manner of allowing an American girl, described as a journalist, to dictate and guide his important government policies. She struck him when he least expected. She asked him "if I went to

America today, to Washington D. C., would I, could I, walk into the white house private dinner and take the American President hostage. And his Defence Chief and his Director of C.I.A? (P 81).

Similarly, Beatrice is also very clear of the roles she wants for women in postcolonial Africa; in the contemporary political struggle. She was not in support of the last resort role usually accorded to national gazette of giving them '... the same role which traditional society gave them of intervening only when everything else has failed.' (P 91) Ikem was quick to accept the advice given to him by her and even later on thanked her for "the gift of insight" she aroused in him. He told her that "your charge has forced me to sit down and contemplate the nature of oppression ... the women are ... the biggest single group of oppressed people in the world" (P. 97-98). Again, the above represents Achebe's new voice on African woman.

Furthermore, Beatrice demonstrated her capacity to look into the future. She was the one that warned the three male friends of the looming danger ahead, which, Chris and Ikem, though highly brilliant and part of the ruling elite of Kangan state, failed to see. In deed a proposal that a woman has the capacity to think and even see better than her male counterparts. Or differently put, what a man can do, a woman can do better.

Beatrice's prophesy became a reality as the relationship of the three characters was stained by the political crises that engulfed them. Ikem, whose only fault was his crusade against the corrupt and oppressive regime of Sam was the first to be eliminated! How? He was first removed as editor. He was later arrested. And finally, he was killed by security agents. Why? It was for his crusades for new political reform; which was interpreted as a revolt against the government. Chris, in sympathy, resigned his appointment in spite of the warning against doing so by the president of Kangan. He was declared wanted and Beatrice knew she was part of this entanglement and decided to be courageous enough to stand it. In deed, Achebe's present African woman!

As Beatrice envisaged, her house was the first place of call by the security agents of Kangan that began the search for Chris. With mind set, Beatrice was ready for the three jeeps full of security agents that arrived her house at midnight. She was not going to cry like a feeble minded person. Her independence was not going to be compromised; and instead, with a fighting spirit, "she snatched a tough pair of jeans from her wardrobes, leapt into them, zipped up and belted. Then she searched and pulled out another pair (P 175). This show of brevity rekindled Elewa's hope for a courageous confrontation with the circumstances they were in. The conduct of the security agents was likened to the inhuman consideration they have and that of the

president's behaviour. This prompts Beatrice's belief that there was no (any) decent young man in the security service and indeed the entire Kangan army and police. A courageous and new woman indeed.

The vacuum created with the murder of Ikem and disappearance of Chris in the leadership of their small organisation fighting the strong forces of Kangan state, led to the assuming role taken by Beatrice. She went out in search of the real situation and challenges of the life the urban poor go through on daily basis. She was confronted face to face with congested accommodations, ill health, lack of food, insecurity and many similar problems. She remains steadfast, courageous, and intelligent in spite of the glaring situation before her.

In the course of Chris's escape to the North, news of the overthrow of the brutal regime of Sam's government and his subsequent kidnap by "unknown person" and later tortured, killed and buried in a shallow grave (P 219) reached the passengers that were travelling in the bus. On this, there were instant jubilation and merriment, which led to an attempt by drunken passengers to rape a young girl. Chris's attempt to rescue the girl was met by a short point-blank in the chest.

Finally, the political turmoil that occurred in the Kangan state subsumed all the three characters. However, Beatrice, the female character, survived. She described their death as "the absurd raffle-draw that apportioned the destiny of post colonial African societies". Her survival is a deliberate attempt by Achebe to let her narrate what happened. According to Gikandi [7] in Bada [6], Achebe intentionally allowed Beatrice to witness the tragic drama of the nation: she is also the voice that rises to reconcile the contrary forces on binary opposition that defines the post colonial state".

However, despite Beatrice's qualification that gives her the sense of freedom and responsibility through the sound education, she still suffered a set back as a result of being marginalized for being a woman. She could not, like her male counterparts, write down her personal story with that of the country. According to her, "who am I that I should inflict my story on the world. (P 80). Thus, Achebe could be said to have failed to address this important issue in women's struggle in post colonial African society. May be, a reflection of woman as a novice in the world of struggle. Beatrice further wonders "whether writing can help the world understand what an insignificant female did or did not in a calamity that consumed so many and so much; she wonders whether writing serves her ego or public service" (P 84).

In summary, it could be said that despite some minor set backs of the dominant female character,

Achebe's creation of the new African woman in *Anthills of the Savannah* is indeed a very big success for the African woman in contemporary political struggle. Beatrice was armed with all the capabilities, potentials and credentials that enabled her to struggle along side and even better than her male counterparts in the political issues in which they found themselves.

The technique of the narratology Achebe uses in *Anthills of the Savannah* is the use of both the first person narrative and the omniscient narrative techniques.

The novel on the whole has three first person narrators who provide their personal accounts of the events in five different chapters. The narrators are Christopher Oriko; Ikem Osodi and Beatrice Okoh. However, the omniscient narrator also gives some account on some other chapters.

Similarly, the narratology was not presented chronologically. This is because flashbacks are used. So also cyclical narrative technique.

#### CONCLUSION

In this novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*, we have seen the new Achebe with a new voice; indeed a born-again novelist and a creator of a new African woman, full of potentials and capabilities.

We have also observed some remarkable differences between the roles of the female characters in Achebe's earlier novels and their roles in his newest novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*.

In his earlier novels, we advanced, the female characters are depicted as inferior, weak and second class citizens while in *Anthills of the Savannah*, we examined, female characters, represented by Beatrice, are portrayed with full potentials and credentials that make them able, like their male counterparts, (or even better?) to face the political and social challenges in their society. In sum, it has been proved that Achebe is truly a born-again novelist with a new voice!

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