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Authoritarianism in *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Abstract:

Chinua Achebe, one of the greatest African writers, has written five novels and established African fiction as significance force in literatures in English. The first three novels are deeply rooted in African culture in general and Igbo way of life in particular. The fourth and fifth novels are set in independent Nigeria with the aim to put the disillusionment of the nation after independence. The fifth novel *Anthills of the Savannah* is a very devastating picturization of the newly independent nation and the native ruthless rulers. This research paper is an attempt to put forward the conditions of citizens in the independent nation under authoritarianism of native dictators.

Keywords: exploitation, neo-colonial, dictator, humiliation imperialism.

Discussion:

Chinua Achebe's fifth and last novel *Anthills of the Savannah* represents political and social turmoil in Nigeria. It is a devastating picture of suffering humanity at the hands of a military dictator, and his conspirators. The democratic government is abolished, and military rule is imposed by an army officer. Abuse of political power is one of the main themes in *Anthills of the Savannah*. The very beginning of the novel suggests about the authoritative behavior of Sam, His Excellency, the military dictator ruling the fictional country, Kangan.

He attacks his one of the cabinet members, very politely, “I will not go to Abazon. Finish! *Kabisa!* Any other business” (Achebe, 01). The firm decision of His Excellency is assertive of his authoritarianism and power. The Commissioner for Information recoils, “I am sorry, Your Excellency. But I have no difficulty swallowing *and* digesting your ruling”(01). It is indicative of the treatment His Excellency gives to his colleagues. It also reflects Sam’s exploitative nature and regimental rule. Then Christopher Oriko tries to stress the moment when Sam grows into a dictator, and the role of some of his colleagues making him so stern and absolute. Chris is the narrator of the first three chapters. He examines that the absoluteness of Sam’s power is perilous for both himself and the people of Kangan.

It is necessary to examine Sam’s behaviour towards his officers’ comments on his character. The cabinet has eleven ministers, and Commissioners, and all are passive and always live under pressure of Sam and his power. The narrator describes some situations which will help to understand the extent to which the ministers are under pressure. Chris conveys that on his right sits the Honorable Commissioner for Education. He is most afraid of Sam, “As soon as he had sniffed peril in the air he had begun to disappear into his hole-” (03). Chris compares his action to small insects that quickly disappear by mere vibration.

In another event, Sam calls his second important officer, the Attorney General for some enquiry. Sam feels utter uneasiness and always suspects something against him. Chris describes his gesture, in which the Attorney General is seated,

The attorney General was perched on the edge of his chair, his left elbow on the table, his neck craning forward to catch His Excellency’s words which he had chosen to speak with unusual softness as if deliberately to put his hearer at a disadvantage; or on full alert on pain of missing a life and death password. (20)

The commissioners’ behavior in the presence of the His Excellency clears the fear of Sam’s power in their minds. Though Sam does not physically harm them, he harasses them

mentally. Their voice and very adoptive sentences prove the perpetual fear in their minds. Jay Laxmi Rao finds the implications of Sam's treatment to his colleagues, "his oppressive regime gags both his cabinet and the man in the street" (63). The mingling of power and politics both create favorable situations for a dictator. Sam always expects his commissioners to obey his orders without examining their validity and appropriateness. He never bothers to impose his decision on them. He insults their intelligence by ignoring their valuable suggestions. The worst thing is that if any cabinet member dislikes being in the cabinet, he cannot resign. Sam threatens them, "If anyone thinks he can leave the Cabinet on this issue he will be making a sad mistake-anyone walking out of that door will not go home but head straight into detention" (Achebe, 109). The cabinet members are helpless, and are unable to oppose and dare not to be out of it. But continue to be present physically.

The narrator describes that whenever Sam feels easy and friendly and does not oppress anyone, the atmosphere in the hall and the atmosphere of the day changes instantly. The narrator puts it as "The fiery sun retires temporarily behind a cloud; we are reprieved and immediately celebrating" (03). But such event is not frequent in the political life of the members because Sam keeps examining the way in which the grip of his authority should not let loose. Moreover, for this he keeps the spirit of attack alive within him. There are rumours that while appointing Major Jonson Ossai as the Director of the State Research Council, secret police, Sam has subjugated his army officers. At a tricky moment, he decides to retire all military members of his cabinet and replace them with the selective civilians. There are unconfirmed rumours of, "-unrest, secret trials and execution in the barracks" (13). Sam has handled these executions with the help of Major Jonson Ossai. He takes only Ossai in confidence while doing unjust things in the state. Ikem, the editor of the government daily newspaper, 'The National Gazette', composes a prose poem, 'Hymn to the Sun' in which he records the fire of the Sun which destroys all the nature. The heat with which the Sun burns is

sufficient to suffer humanity. The poem is lengthy and attributed to fierce Sun. Symbolically the Sun represents Sam, the dictator. A critic of Achebe's novels Simon Gikandi explains the meaning in the poem in very short but very direct manner.

The poem is, of course, defined by its strong elegiac tone; it is a sustained lament for the death of the nation and the catastrophe that has come over its people. The poem seeks a reason for present suffering from the Almighty and wanders why attempts at sacrifice and expiation have failed. (137)

Sam feels constant threat for his regime from an unknown source. That is why he fears delegation, and petition and to be with ordinary people. The leader of the Abazon delegation expresses his fears that His Excellency is not likely to visit their drought affected region personally. Furthermore, the old man tells an African parable of struggle of the tortoise with the leopard to stress the point that the story of struggle will outlive than a man. It will survive in future to guide the next generations. So for Sam the story teller is a threat. He arrests the six members of delegation. Then he is troubled by Ikem's criticism of government consequently, he removes Ikem from his post.

Ikem being a poet and writer proposes revolution which is a remedy to present problems in Kangan. However he does not prefer text-book revolution. Instead he wants to "excite general enlightenment by forcing all the people to examine the condition of their lives because, as the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth living" (Achebe, 146). As a writer, he wants to widen the scope of that self-examination. He wants the people must see beyond self, the present claptrap and the radicalism will help all their problems on the "doorstep of capitalism and imperialism" (146). In this way, Ikem gives a way towards liberation of the people of Kangan and expects actions from the public against the dictatorship. He tries to incite the public, especially to the students to criticize the military government.

However delivers a lecture to the students of Bassa University. But Sam does not like it. Consequently, Ikem is charged with inciting the students against the government, and is murdered by the police. When the reality of Ikem's murder reaches the students, they collect the copies of the National Gazette in which the story of Ikem's death is presented indefinitely, and burn in the middle of the Freedom Square. The students recognize the guilt of the government and try to pull down it. The government feels threat from the student so it closes the university for indefinite period. It continues the exploitation of the students.

The government suspects that Chris may be in Beatrice's flat. Some military officers and sergeants enter in the flat at midnight. The sergeant says to Beatrice that he has instructions to search her flat. They throw all things everywhere with great fury. Elewa and Beatrice feel very strange in their actions. They searched everywhere but did not say any word to Beatrice about what they were searching for. At last the officers apologize for disturbing Beatrice's sleep and leave the flat. Beatrice is very scared by the sudden incident, and expressed her distress, "Could there really be even one decent young man in the Security Services or indeed the entire Kangan Army and Police" (163). This midnight drama leaves a very deep mark on the mind of Elewa and Beatrice for many days. Both feel lonely and in great impending danger and insecure.

Ikem finds great disparity between two regions of Kangan and the negligence of the government to the north region. Achebe has very cleverly; created two different situations in Southern and Northern regions of Kangan with these two regions he wants to show the government's unequal treatment and ignorance of the particular region. Chris leaves Bassa for security reasons and travels to the north through the Great North Road. While travelling, he can see so many differences between two regions the conditions in the North region are not worth to live. The people of Abazon region are facing severe drought and the water tankers are not providing drinking water regularly. So the price of water is increased. Moreover the

government services are not working properly. The policemen are very corrupt and ill treat the lorry and the Bus drivers for no reason. Chris sees that they hardly take care of passengers but concentrate on demanding and receiving gratification from the drivers.

After a few kilometers from Agbata City, Braimoh, the leader of the taxi drivers' union, diverts their attention to a large crowd on the road ahead. There are a few cars and trucks parked along the roadside. No one knows what the matter is. So the passengers go to have a look. Chris goes to investigate what is happening on the road. Then someone informs Chris that the soldiers and sergeants are celebrating the fall of the military government in Bassa. Then Chris hears a scream of a girl in another section of the crowd. A drunken sergeant drags a girl into another section of the crowd. He is dragging the girl towards the cluster of huts. He has a gun dangling from his neck. This humiliation is a practice of everyday affairs in this part of the country. The soldiers and sergeants oppress the poor people physically. Chris tries to release the girl but the sergeant shoots him down with this gun and Chris dies on the spot. The military government takes life of the two intellectuals in Kangan. Achebe's depiction of these fast-moving incidents is vivid and suggestive about the suffering at the hands of cruel police and sergeants. These conditions are mere representative of military rule and sufferings of Ikem, Chris, Beatrice and the people of Abazon region, because the intellectuals create threats to the government and the Abazon people have not voted for life presidency of Sam. Achebe sees such conditions in almost all countries in post-independent period.

The manifestation of social evil can be seen in the novel *Anthills of the Savannah*. The military soldiers, who provide security to the people in Bassa, cause many troubles for the people in the market and in the streets. They wander in their army car around the Gelegele Market. It happens that an Army car at full speed is about to hit a street hawker on its back. The young trader gets terrified and asks the soldier fearfully; "Oga, you want to kill me? - If I

kill you I kill dog-”(44) says the soldier. Many African people believe that to ride over a dog brings luck as one can observe in Achebe’s second novel *No Longer Ease*. It means that soldiers consider the men in the street not as humans but as dogs.

In another incident, Ikem criticizes the historical kings and monarchs for their tyranny and exploitation of workers and artists. According to him national structures like the Taj Mahal, the Cathedrals of Europe, the Stone Towers of Zimbabwe, the mighty Pyramids of Egypt are erected by making the workers and sculptures work very hard. These structures are based on the inhuman efforts of such people.

Then Beatrice reminds painful childhood experiences in her family. She says that her father was a very stubborn man. He had a whip with which he used to beat not only his children but the children in his village also. He was famous for his whipping. Beatrice and her three sisters were always under the fear of being beaten. She has suffered more than her sisters. She reminds that her mother also explicated her. One day her father whipped her, she says, “I rushed to her and hugged her legs but instead of pressing me to herself as I had expected she pushed me away so violently that I hit my head against the wooden mortar” (79) only because Beatrice was the fifth girl in a line of four. Beatrice realizes that her father and mother have their own world, and her sisters’ have theirs, and she is alone. She recalls the moment when her mother desperately cried and prayed for a boy at her birth. Besides her name Beatrice, she had given another name at her baptism, *Nwanyibuife*; a female is also something. Beatrice as a child disliked the name because of its meaning, “all I’m trying to say really is that as far as I can remember I have always been on my own and ever asked to be noticed by anybody, Never!” (80). Beatrice summarizes the social status of women in her father’s house. She says it is better to marry a rascal than grow old in father’s house: better to marry Mr. Wrong than wait for Mr. Right in heaven. According to her, all men are the same. Further she says,

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-There was enough male chauvinism in my father's house to last me seven reincarnations!(80-81)

The above childhood memories and her agony are a realization of Beatrice's suffering as a girl and her exploitation by her parents.

In the course of the novel, Ikem also points out that, "the women are, of course, the biggest single group of oppressed people in the world-" (90). He states that besides women, there are others: rural peasants in every land, the urban poor in industrialized countries, and Black people everywhere including their own countries, ethnic and religious minorities and lower casts in all countries in the world are the exploited people. Prof. Jaya Laxmi Rao also holds the same view about the novel, "One of the crucial issues of the epoch setting novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, is the issue of power, of power and politics of power in connection with oppressing woman and the poor"(62). For Ikem the most apparent practical difficulty is the magnitude and heterogeneity of the problem. He finds that there is a universal conglomerate of the oppressed people. In this matter, Ikem becomes a mouthpiece of Achebe and says free people are alike everywhere in their freedom but contrary to it, the marginalized and oppressed people inhabit their own peculiar hell. The exploited people fail to recognize this because of the present orthodoxies of deliverance. He mourns that no system can change it because it is built into the core of man's free spirit. He goes beyond this and searches that, "The sweeping, majestic vision of people rising victorious like a tidal wave against their oppressor and transforming their world with theories and slogans into a new heaven and a new earth of brotherhood, justice and freedom are at least grand illusions" (Achebe, 90). The concepts like freedom, liberty, rights, independence, and consciousness are mere illusions for the ordinary people because the oppressors are already there with new exploitative systems, values and beliefs to impose on ordinary people. Larry Diamand, scholar on Achebe's novel,

argues on the particular issues of struggle, “The novel is also a clarion call to struggle, and its story is an existential affirmation of the necessity and dignity of the struggle against evil as an end in itself”(125).

Conclusion:

In this way, with the help of his protagonist Ikem, Achebe stresses the point that revolution may take the society out of this syndrome but it cannot confirm the complete freedom for such oppressed people, it cannot stop their suffering in any way.

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