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EXPLORING POWER DYNAMICS OF MILITARY DICTATORSHIP IN NIGERIA: CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH* IN FOCUS

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Abstract:

The role of the military in developing countries is often considered controversial, especially in countries of Africa, Asia and South America, where they have gone beyond their traditional duties of defending their countries against external aggression and maintaining internal security to venture into active politics. In Nigeria, the military is more notorious for its involvement in the country's politics than any other activity. While scholars in diverse fields have assessed military relationship with civil society from different perspectives as praiseworthy or condemnable, Nigerian writers often explore its activities in war and politics. Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) is a kaleidoscopic exploration of the military's odyssey in Nigerian politics. The main objective of this paper is to probe the military in Nigerian politics and the power dynamics associated with the phenomenon, especially in their relationship with civil society using *Anthills of the Savannah* as critical text. In so doing, it highlights military behaviours and attitudes that deviate from the norm espoused in major theories on the military. The study deploys military theories as framework in the analysis of conflicts in the text.

Keywords: Military dictatorship, power, politics, Achebe, Nigerian novel, literature and society

Introduction:

This study is premised on the view that literature and society have a symbiotic relationship that is mutually impactful and enriching to both aspects as each borrows from and feeds the other (see Mutiso (1974), Rockwell (1974), Gakwandi (1977), Julien, Mortimer & Schade (1986), and Onwuka (2010)). Literature is thus a veritable site of representation where societal forces and conflicts are explored so that art becomes a moral prism through which social issues could be viewed to appreciate their diverse ideological colourations. This study views the phenomenon of the military in Nigerian politics an anomaly that throws up conflicts that endanger the wellbeing of society. It is important to note that a major factor that lured the military into Nigerian politics is the poverty of leadership ethics among the political leaders. It is that same cause that has elicited the critical response of writers to military dictatorship in the Nigerian polity. This paucity of leadership principles among Nigeria's ruling elite (both political and military) has prompted writers to explore the near state of anomie that prevailed in the worst years of military dictatorship in their literary and critical writings with the objective of highlighting national problems and proffering solutions to them (see Achebe, 1983 and Onwuka, 2016). 'Power' as used in this study is "the possession of control or command over others; authority, ascendancy" (*Dictionary.com*). Power dynamics hence refers to effects of power relations between the military and the civil populace on society as a whole.

Theories on the Military

Major theories on the military fall within two broad categories: those on institutionalism and those on functionalism. Theories on institutionalism concern the constitution of the military as a professional body in society. Theorists of this persuasion, among them Plato and Adam Smith, argue that the military institution is a necessity to society (Grundy 4, Kennedy 1). Huntington, also among them, argues that the military should be a pure and professional vocation. To him, it is this professionalism that marks a sharp distinction between “the warriors of previous ages” and modern soldiers (7). For him, the military should be isolated from the rigours of politics and civil affairs; a step that works toward developing a military ethic that should produce what he calls “the military mind” (59). He contends that the military mind engenders discipline, rigidity, and a scientific mindedness. It is not “flexible, tolerant, intuitive or emotional” because such emotions hamper optimal performance for the professional soldier (60). Huntington identifies two levels in civil-military relationship: “the power level” and “the ideological level.” The first concerns the relationship between military power and the civil populace and the second concerns “the compatibility of the professional military ethic with the political ideologies prevailing in society” (86-87). The military, he concludes, should be under civilian control.

Like Huntington, Janowitz maintains that the military should be “disciplined, inflexible, and in a sense [be] unequipped for political compromise” (4). A modern military force, he argues, should possess the spirit of solidarity because without this group commitment, there is little chance of success for any body of soldiers. Janowitz’s military must be well trained and nurtured on the principles necessary to sustain the internal cohesion of the force and also maintain a degree of prestige in the eyes of the civil populace. Although he had the American military in mind in his study, Janowitz believes that honour should guide the behaviour of the professional soldier the world over. He underscores the significance of honour to the soldier observing that “Honor is the basis of [the military] belief system. Military honor is both means and an end. The code of honor specifies how an officer ought to behave, but to be ‘honorable’ is an objective to be achieved for its own right” (215).

Also from the institutionalism perspective, Grundy sustains that an ideal military is one isolated from politics and possessing the attributes that Huntington and Janowitz have elaborated. He argues that “the rightful place of the military is in the barracks. Its chief role is to protect a state from external invasion, and is expected to keep out of politics, an area that is not regarded as its proper domain” (4-5). This is clearly a Platonic view that the military should focus exclusively on deployments of force to defend the state. Grundy concludes with an eye on African militaries that professionalism remains the basis for an efficient military force in any society, and such force should be under civilian authority (4).

Theorists of the functionalist persuasion are also diverse; however, they theorize basically on the conduct of the military as a social group. Coles’ view among them is representative of the American position. For him, the overriding principle that should guide whatever functions the military perform is the consolidation and extension of national goals. This view aligns with Huntington’s position that the military is the symbol of the collective will of the society whose activities should be considered from the perspective that they sustain “the supremacy of the society over the individual” (2).

Contrary to the foregoing are the subversive views of First who faults the application of Western parameters in assessing postcolonial African militaries. She asserts that “the theory of the non-political army served the purposes of the colonial powers [because] an army that questioned policies or politicians might be driven to question colonialism itself. . . [So for Africa], there is no such thing as a non-political army. . . [since] the theory was transplanted to Africa from the domestic needs of the Western European states” (426).

Contemporary African militaries are colonial legacies often appraised in the light of peculiar circumstances connected with their establishment in the continent (see Grundy 1968). These circumstances also apply to the Nigerian military (Momoh & Adejumbi 8). Thus, Coups, armed conflicts, and other acts of intervention have become major considerations in theorizing on African militaries (Venter 6). Luckam identifies two trends in theorizing African militaries. The first concerns the influence of the political environment of the continent on the conduct of her militaries; and the second relates to the extent that “organizational and professional characteristics” of the institution affect their conduct (4). Explicating the first trend where the military often act as “arbiters of social dissensions”, Luckam observes that in Africa, “structures are so weak in countries of low or minimal political culture, and boundaries so poorly maintained that military organizations themselves are shaped and permeated by the political environment” (4). It is this viewpoint that seems to justify the military’s incursion into Nigerian politics resulting in military dictatorship.

Sketching Context of Military Presence in Nigerian Politics

The reputation of the Nigerian military is to a great extent connected with its involvement in politics. Comparatively, it has gained little recognition in the role where “The soldier of an adult nation is...a citizen who by means of arms defends the nation” (Fanon 162). *Anthills of the Savannah*, which has been described as “a complex but highly readable political and ideological work” (Mezu 121), presents a story that typifies the military’s odyssey in Nigeria’s politics. It is a novel counted among “various attempts by Nigerian writers to grapple with the issue of military governance” (Adeoti 11). In it the military was hailed into politics by a long-suffering citizenry that could no longer stomach the politicians’ arrant abuse of power and brazen neglect of the people who voted them into government. However, the military eventually lost the support of the people so that when the story began, the people felt no better [and perhaps worse] than they were under politicians. In all, apart from being actively involved in the country’s politics, the Nigerian military negates virtually all the theories enunciated by the scholars reviewed in the foregoing with the obvious exception of First’s.

The military in the novel is explored against the backdrop of the leadership crisis that has been the bane of many developing countries. Leadership as a crucial factor in any nation’s quest for development constitutes the fulcrum on which other issues rest. In the novel is a military that presents itself as a better alternative to a political leadership overwhelmed by the sudden realization that it had in its palm the resources of a whole nation. So taking advantage of being the custodian of the national war arsenal, the military shot their way into power with assurances to the populace that they nurse no political ambitions. Though their very first acts in government of appointing civilian ministers and advisers to run the affairs of state while they sit like sentinels over them addressed their need for acceptance

both locally and internationally, these appointments created other problems. Their dependence on some of the political leaders they had sacked inadvertently established grounds for continuity in the vices that had paralyzed the nation since independence. It was this dependency that sealed the fate of the military to fail.

The military in *Anthills of the Savannah* is similar to other despotic military regimes in power in diverse novels like Festus Iyayi's *Violence* (1979), Ben Okri's *The Famished Road* (1991), Isidore Okpewho's *Tides* (1993), Okey Ndibe's *Arrows of Rain* (2000), Helon Habila's *Waiting for An Angel* (2002) and Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) among others. Despotic abuse of power bereft of the common good is synonymous with military dictatorship. This is what is explored in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Compared to the civilian leadership they derided, the military fared far worse in all aspects of governance which is a clear indication that politics is completely outside their domain of competence.

Profiling Military Dictatorship in *Anthills of the Savannah*

The independent nation of Kangan (the fictive name for Nigeria in the text) finds itself in the fierce grip of an inhumane junta that is savagely tyrannical, despotic and overbearing in all its actions. The stratocracy of His Excellency Sam is autocratic and insensitive to the feelings of the citizens. It became a country where 'thinking' is considered an affront to military authority. Dissent of opinions is not condoned even if it comes from his 'trusted' appointees. When Chris Oriko, his childhood friend and closest commissioner, attempts to air his opinion on an issue, His Excellency retorts, "But me no buts, Mr. Oriko! The matter is closed, I said. How many times, for God's sake am I expected to repeat it? Why do *you* find it so difficult to swallow my ruling. [Sic] On anything?" (*Anthills* 1) The word 'swallow' is synonymous with the military ethic of 'obeying orders without reservations'. That His Excellency expects no less from his civilian ministers indicates the military's intent to run the nation like the barracks. Many of the conflicts in the novel actually result from situations where individuals 'dared' to question military decisions or actions. His Excellency's disposition in the novel is very unpredictable as a wrong word could precipitate doom for the sloppy victim. His reprimand above sets off a chain reaction that could have been very disastrous for the commissioner had he not capitulated in the nick of time. This zero-tolerance for free expression by the military clearly shows their distrust and contempt for debate and compromise in society. His Excellency takes the military's abhorrence for discussions into politics against the political and intellectual class that constitute his Cabinet and treats them with undisguised contempt. His low opinion of them is clear when he warns: "Soldiers are plain and blunt. ... [W]hen we turn affairs of state back to you and return to barracks [you can] resume your civilian tricks. Have a little patience" (*Anthills* 4). The military also demonstrated its disdain for the common people in an incident of reckless driving involving a soldier and a roadside hawker whom the former narrowly missed running over. The vehement retort by the soldier, "If I kill you I kill dog" (*Anthills* 48) gives an insight into his overall opinion of civil society. His callous declaration that the hawker's life is not worth more than a dog's is indicative of his deep-seated contempt for civilians. It is a clear indication that he would have run over the boy without hesitation if the latter had been slower in getting out of the way.

Financial recklessness is another trademark of military dictatorship. By spending public money without accountability they let society know they are subject to no other law. The military in *Anthills of the Savannah* are far more financially reckless in government than the politicians they replaced. They decide and act impulsively on pecuniary matters without considering their consequences. Frequently, they dispatch very sensitive fiscal matters of state with the ‘immediate effect’ swiftness of the barracks. One of the first acts of the junta at gaining power is to spend twenty million to refurbish a Presidential Retreat built at the cost of forty-five million by the previous government (*Anthills* 73). This was in a period when Kangan was peopled by an impoverished citizenry and regions like Abazon lack basic water supply. The subtle irony in the text is that a junta that brands itself a ‘corrective’ government actually turns out more wasteful than the politicians it had condemned as incorrigible spendthrifts. Worse, it spends a lot more on tracking down perceived enemies and throwing parties for foreigners than in providing infrastructure for the people. An instance is the lavish luncheon party thrown for the American Lou Cranford, a mere journalist, at the Presidential Retreat just to impress the international community (*Anthills* 74 – 81).

Further, military dictatorship engenders an atmosphere of fear and insecurity. This is explored in *Anthills of the Savannah* where the junta spreads fear in its chase of real and imagined enemies. Consequently, most of the activities of the characters in the novel are in one way or another motivated by fear and a sense of insecurity. From His Excellency, his military henchmen and his civilian Cabinet to the mass media (to which Ikem Osodi belongs), the civil service (to which Beatrice belongs), students and the common people like the Abazonians all live in fear. However, the fear that haunts the military is often imagined while that of the people is real. His Excellency is constantly apprehensive about his safety from all around him, including his closest associates, ministers and the masses of Kangan who ironically all live in dread of him. When Abazonians resident in Bassa, the capital city, accompanied six of their representatives to the Presidential Palace, His Excellency panicked when they arrived, ‘What is going on?’ he demands, frantically” (*Anthills* 9). Many of the atrocities committed by the military in the novel therefore are traceable to their debilitating fear of retribution by society. The military leadership’s morbid suspicion of all around him and his irrational sense of insecurity progressively turn him into a monster. Some of his actions that emanate from this state of trepidation include his arrest and detention of an Abazonian delegation on a goodwill visit and the arrest and murder of Ikem Osodi, the voice of the oppressed in the novel. All these imply that the military’s domination and oppression of society are not fortuitous; rather, they are deliberate and calculated to subvert civil authority over the military.

Military Dictatorship as Metaphor for Social Alienation and Psychological Trepidation

The dread of the military in society is palpable in *Anthills of the Savannah*. This fear emanates from a common knowledge that no one is immune from incarceration or execution when the military are prowling for victims. Soldiers are nearly always associated with pain, bondage, suffering and death, which are common in military regimes. Ironically, this apprehension is more intense in their closest advisers and associates who try their utmost not to criticize or contradict them. Chris, the commissioner closest to the military dictator paints a sardonic picture of cabinet meetings of the junta:

Days are good or bad for us [the Cabinet] now according to how His Excellency gets out of bed in the morning. On a bad day, such as this one had suddenly become after many propitious auguries, there is nothing for it but to keep close to your hole, ready to scramble in. And particularly to keep your mouth shut, for nothing is safe, not even the flattery we have become such experts in disguising as debate. (*Anthills 2*)

The disposition and attitudes of the cabinet members reveal how deep-seated the fear of the military is among the intellectuals and technocrats among them. Consequently, they cower and grovel before His Excellency. For instance, the Education Commissioner is characterized as a quarry so fearful for his life that his attitude and behaviour sometimes degenerate into the ludicrous. According to Chris, “He is by far the most frightened of the lot; as soon as he sniff[s] peril in the air, he [begins] to disappear into his hole, as some animals and insects do, backwards” (*Anthills 2*). He capitulated several times under military intimidation unmindful of his loss of dignity and relevance in the eyes of his fellow intellectuals. This dread of the military pervades practically every gathering even when they not physically present because no one dares disparage them.

The military as a metaphor of trepidation through intimidation is clearly manifest in *Anthills of the Savannah*. The novel projects the view that power not backed by the people is illegitimate and harmful to society. The manner the military acquires power and the tyrannical ways they use it deprive them of acceptability. The junta is rejected by the people in a referendum on the life presidency project of its leader. In response, and predictably too, the military responds calculatedly and brutally. It blacklists the grossly underdeveloped Abazon. The condition of Abazon and the plight of its people in the novel are direct consequences of their resistance to an unjust military regime where manipulation and subterfuge are rife. The military had pursued the life-presidency ambition of its leader with guile and deception. The deceit in the whole campaign had raised the suspicions of the people who in their simplicity of mind noted the contradictions in the story being sold to them. The words of the old leader of the Abazon delegation clearly show that lack of education is not lack of common sense. He and his people in the rural area of the country discerned the deviousness in the military project and took a decisive stand. They needed no one to tell them that when “all kinds of people came running in and out of [their] villages asking [them] to say yes...and their eyes shifted from side to side...that cunning had entered the matter” (*Anthills 126*). So they vote against the continuation of the junta on instinct. Their action, however, brings out the worst in the military.

The military’s inclination to deal ruthlessly with its perceived enemies is exemplified in the text with its response to the Abazon province. The wrath of His Excellency against the Abazonians knew no bounds; and vindictively, he punished them for rejecting him. His vengeance assumes a psychological dimension when he sends emissaries to notify the recalcitrant province of the impending calamity they have brought upon themselves. The verdict is devastating and is delivered with the callousness of one who knows the depth of military retribution:

Because you said no to the Big Chief he is very angry and has ordered all the water bore-holes they are digging in your area to be closed so that you will know what it means to offend the sun. You will suffer so much that in your next reincarnation you

will need no one to tell you to say yes whether the matter is clear to you or not.
(*Anthills* 127)

Two significant issues are obvious above. First, the apathy among the common people to the power game at the top is not lost to the military. The people's concern is not about who governs the state, but the provision of basic amenities of modern life like potable water, good roads, health care service and housing among others. They complain only when these things are not in place as in Abazon. The threat 'whether the matter is clear to you or not' flung at the people shows that the military leadership does not expect the populace it governs to 'understand' anything before they accede to its behest. Second, the military perceives the resources of the country as theirs to dole out as it deems fit. So, the junta's suspension of all government assistance to Abazon aggravates the scourge of famine and disease caused by the drought in the region. The consequent horrendous state of affair in the province metaphorically becomes a gloomy landscape where "the trees became 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 brush fires. Household animals were all dead. First the pigs fried in their own fat; and then the sheep and goats and cattle choked by their swollen tongues . . ." (*Anthills* 32).

The metaphor of the sun also offers two divergent interpretations. Though the sun is a powerful and enduring source of energy and sustainer of life; yet, it is a vengeful force, a potent harbinger of pain and destruction. The military in the novel manifest these two traits. Those who obey them unquestionably often enjoy their benevolence through economic empowerment and political favours. Alhaji Mahmoud and Professor Ekong are such beneficiaries in the text. On the other hand, those who defy them, like the Abazonians did, are punished viciously. The sun therefore symbolizes the military that is implacable when 'offended'. Thus, the capitulation of the Abazonians fails to assuage the wrath of the junta which lords it over Kangan like the sun over the earth. The speech of the Abazon leader in Bassa is a cry of lamentation, a desperate plea for mercy to the military:

We are ready to learn new things and mend our old, useless way. Sometime ago we were told that the Big Chief himself was planning to visit our villages and see our suffering. Then we were told again that he was not coming because he had just remembered that we had said no to him two years ago. So we said, if he will not come, let us go and visit him instead in his house. It is proper that a beggar should visit a king. It is the place of the poor man to make a visit to the rich man who holds the yam and the knife. . . . So we came to Bassa to say our own yes and perhaps the work on our bore-holes will start again and we will not all perish from the anger of the sun. We did not know before but we know now that yes does not cause trouble.
(*Anthills* 127)

The 'old, useless ways' above clearly refers to when it was believed the place of the military was in the barracks; when its central duty was to protect the people for whose benefit they existed; and when people could express themselves freely without fear of losing their freedom or lives. That 'normal' period is long gone in the past. In contrast, the present dispensation of the military in politics is the 'new way'; when one says just what is required of them to be free from molestation and learn that 'yes does not cause trouble'. Respect for

age-old virtues of honesty and truth are no longer encouraged because they have been displaced by hypocrisy and deceit entrenched by the anomaly of military regimes.

The power relations between the military and civil society in *Anthills of the Savannah* is one of brutality by the former against the latter. The military deploy power capriciously against the rest of society both physically and psychologically. Major Samsonite Ossai and his State Research Council (SRC), a government security agency, personify all that is atrocious and detestable about soldiers especially by their arrest and murder of Ikem and the aggressive invasion of Beatrice's apartment. In the second event, a group of soldiers knocks up two defenseless women (Beatrice and Elewa) late in the night to conduct a search. Beatrice had barely opened the door when, "It was wrenched out of her grip and swung outwards. Then a huge soldier rushed in pushing the two women aside so powerfully to his right and left in a dry breast-stroke movement that sent Elewa, so slight as a reed, down on the floor on her bottom" (*Anthills* 176). Although the woman flung to the floor is heavy with child, the sergeant did not pause to consider what he did but proceeds to ravage the apartment unmindful of the destruction he leaves in his wake. Other brutal acts of the military in the novel range from abduction, illegal detention, torture and murder.

The loss of liberty under military dictatorships is most pronounced in the struggle of writers to function in society. They often find themselves in a dilemma of either confronting the evil of tyranny or stifling their pens. Ikem, the writer in the novel, chooses the first and pays the ultimate price despite the fact that the leader of the junta is his personal friend. The inability of the military to understand the dynamics of politics is a clear indication that the institution should not be directly involved in it. The orientation of the military mind makes it difficult for them to attune their conduct to the haggling and bickering associated with politics, an area that is diametrically at variance with their combat training. This is in tandem with Huntington's view cited early in this paper.

However, *Anthills of the Savannah* depicts a few acts of the military that seem to go against the grain of its notoriety. One act is its abrogation of the Public Execution Act that many deemed barbaric (*Anthills* 43). However this occurred in the early days of the junta when it courted the support of the people to gain acceptance. More symbolically, it could have done so to show that laws could be made or dismantled at its whim.

Conclusion

This study has explored the power dynamics of military dictatorship in *Anthills of the Savannah*, which in the main reveals the negative impacts of the military's presence in Nigerian and invariably African politics. Military dictatorship engenders abuse of power, loss of liberty, brutality, oppression, intimidation, fear and insecurity in society. Military characters are aggressive, egoistic, base and tactless in their relationship with civil society. In power, they are tyrannical, oppressive and sadistic in the manner they brutalize and oppress civilians. All these and their demonstration of much indiscipline and mercantilism, the novel indicates, condemn them as a metaphor of bad leadership.

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