

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/317082919>

POSTCOLONIALISM AND ACHEBE'S ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH

Conference Paper · January 2013

CITATIONS

0

READS

10,177

1 author:



Fatma Kalpaklı
Selcuk University

54 PUBLICATIONS 10 CITATIONS

SEE PROFILE

Some of the authors of this publication are also working on these related projects:



REPRESENTATION OF PAIN AND OLD AGE IN IRIS [View project](#)



POSTCOLONIALISM AND ACHEBE'S *ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH*

Fatma Kalpaklı

Selcuk University, Konya, Turkey

Chinua Achebe deals with the problems of Nigeria after her independence in the *Anthills of the Savannah* and he criticizes the Nigerian politicians and administrators because of their wrong policies and letting corruption spread in every field of life in Nigeria. To describe this atmosphere in postcolonial Nigeria, Achebe also makes use of the symbols and images efficiently in his novel in order to show the extent of corruption in Nigeria. Through these symbols, the readers may grasp the importance of the events and the political situation in Nigeria fully. Therefore, in this paper postcolonial issues and political problems in independent Nigeria will be studied in reference to the symbols in Achebe's novel called *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah*, Neo-colonialism, Symbols, Postcolonial Nigeria.

Anthills of the Savannah is mainly about neo-colonialism, which means the oppression of the indigenous people by their own politicians and elite. It narrates the problems of Nigeria in her transition period from colonial period to postcolonial period. Nigeria gets her independence from Britain in 1960, but she can not get rid of exploitation and corruption and what is more tragic is that she begins to be exploited by her own people. All these issues are conveyed to the readers not only through the characters and events, but also with the help of the symbols and images in the novel. This paper aims at exploring the symbols and their meanings in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*.

First of all, the title itself is symbolic. David Carroll in *Chinua Achebe, Novelist, Poet, Critic* expresses that "the time of drought has come round again for the people of Abuzon, but the scorched anthills, surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year's brush fires, offer little hope of renewal. Also they are the reminder of people's struggle as a warning and a promise". Thus, the anthills can be taken as the symbol of either despair or hope, depending on the perspective of the reader. Moreover, it can also be suggested that they also stand for the Nigerian society. An Anthill is a community of ants, which are black or brown and they come together and try to create a communal society, just like the Nigerian people, regardless of their racial/ethnic, gender or religious differences, try to do after the independence.

Related to the issue of hope and despair, there is also the image of Tidal Wave. In the novel, the Tidal Wave may represent the dreams of the Nigerian people, despite their oppressors. It rises and transforms their world into a new world of brotherhood, justice and freedom. Then it falls as justice and freedom are grand illusions and therefore comes the new oppressor. It is like heart-beats, when it rises, the hope of justice also rises, when it falls, the hope of achieving peace and order falls, as well.

Moreover, the naming-ceremony in the novel may stand for democracy, because all the people in the room gives a name to the baby (Elewa and Ikem's baby) together regardless of their sex, religion and colour. Laura Pilar Gelfman in “The Confluence of Religion and Economic Class in the *Anthills of the Savannah*” expresses that

the ceremony closes the gap between the elite and the poor because the rituals cross class lines; it also represents Achebe's visions of a cross class unity with people from different religions and social classes in attendance. Prior to the ceremony, Beatrice who comes from an elite, Christian fundamentalist background, looks down upon Agatha, [who is] a Muslim servant, with condescension and disrespect. The ceremony portrays Beatrice's newfound respect for those, [who are] different from her religiously and economically. (<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/achebe/jlg1.html>)

Ikem's motto “Go home and think” is a two-sided knife and it becomes a threat to government and in return to Ikem's life. Thinking and having an inquisitive mind is likened to having a bomb in Nigeria. Similarly, in the novel, it is stated that “story-tellers are a threat” (Achebe 141). Thus, the exchange of ideas is something to be avoided in Nigeria. What is noticeable is that Ikem's death because of his ideas in the novel may also stand for the real events in Nigeria. Gelfman informs us that

[i]n present day Nigeria, Ken Saro-Wiwa was executed for bringing Ikem's proclamation to reality. The government silences Ikem and Saro-Wiwa [in order to prevent the freedom of thinking. In the novel, as they say]... “we may accept a limitation on our actions but never under no circumstances, must we accept restriction on our thinking” (Achebe 207). (<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/achebe/jlg1.html>)

Moreover, Jason M. Smith in “The Continuing Colonialism” suggests that

the people do not endorse the British style of totalitarian rule, but the deaths of Chris and Ikem, new leaders of the people, suggest that “the country is also not yet ready for democracy”. The three murders reflect the political chaos of backward Kangan. Achebe, however, ends on a hopeful note with the birth of Elewa and Ikem's child. Named Amaechina, “May the path never close,” one hopes the child will continue on the path followed by Ikem, the path to establishing an equitable government. (<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/achebe/contcol.html>)

Apart from these, iron grills have symbolic meanings in the novel and these iron grills may represent “the need for protection” as it is illustrated through Beatrice. In the *Anthills of the Savannah*, Beatrice says, “I had been feeling somewhat more protected lately since I had all doors and windows in the flat reinforced with iron grills so that even if the fellow outside did manage to knock down the outer wooden door he would still have to face the iron, all of which gave you some time to plan your escape” (Achebe 85). The reasons of her feeling insecure and her longing for being safe and secure can be found in her childhood years and in the chaotic atmosphere of Nigeria, as well.

In in the *Anthills of the Savannah*, it is stated that since her childhood, Beatrice has witnessed violence in her family circles. For instance, her father has a famous whip and her mother pushes Beatrice away violently. Therefore, she is insecure and with the irongrills, her sense of insecurity becomes concrete in the novel. With regard to her, “the bird in the cage” image is also used in the novel: “She [Beatrice] left her office like a bird released from its cage, on the dot of three-thirty” (Achebe 165). In this scene, the cliché of “the bird in the cage” image

is used because she is not only a woman, but also she is in a colonized country. Thus, she is doubly oppressed. She further represents all the Nigerian people who are captivated within the chaos of Nigeria.

Moreover, there is a mythological story in the *Anthills of the Savannah* and there is a black lake and a dry stick rising erect from the bare, earth floor" (Achebe 94). In this story, the black lake may be taken for the chaotic situation of Nigeria and the dry stick coming out of the bare earth floor may foreshadow Beatrice's pen of writing, because earth is associated with the mother-goddesses and it is bare, not productive yet, as Beatrice is a stranger to her own country, before combining her western education¹ with her indigenous culture and in the novel, this is expressed in the following words: "Pillar of Water fusing earth to heaven at the novel of the black lake" (94). Like water, two cultures come together in the black lake, which may stand for Nigeria.

In another story in the novel, a mythological woman counts until seven (Achebe 95). As it is in the Sumerians, seven is a holy number and in the *Anthills of the Savannah*, it also becomes the symbol of "peace": "She holds his hand like a child in front of the holy stick and counts seven. Then she arranges carefully on the floor seven fingers of chalk, fragile symbols of peace and then gets him to sit on them so lightly that not one single finger may be broken". Notice that it is fragile and people should care for it. Parallel to the Ecofeminist claims, which suggest that women are more sensitive towards nature and peace, in this mythological story, it is a woman who organizes the seven fingers of chalks and it is interesting that she puts a man to protect it. Similarly, men, in Beatrice's near environment, are in the foreground in the struggle of achieving peace and order, except for her father.

On the contrary, Beatrice's father's whip becomes the symbol of authority and violence in the novel. The violence in her family can be taken as the microcosm of the violence in patriarchal Nigeria. Simon Gikan in *Reading Chinua Achebe* argues that Beatrice's recollections of her father and his insistence on the subordinated position of women in the household do foreshadow her future marginalization in the political culture. Violence and tortures in Nigeria are further expressed in the following words in the novel: "This was the man who invented the simplest of tortures for preliminary interrogations... a paper stabler... just place the hand where paper should be" (Achebe 97). In the *Anthills of the Savannah*, not only humans, but also animals are exposed to violence, "[u]nfortunately armed robbers of Kangan do not stop at kicking dogs; they shoot them" (Achebe 98).

Furthermore, Achebe makes use of animal imagery (such as birds and lizards) in order to tell the colonial history of Nigeria: "Strange but tears loomed suddenly in Beatrice's eyes as she spoke to the bird: Poor fellow. You have not heard the news? The king's treasury was broken into last night and all his property carried away his crown, his sceptre and all" (Achebe 99). In this passage, the withdrawal of the colonizers are depicted with the usage of some symbols. The king's treasury may stand for the raw materials of Nigeria and it is carried away to Britain. In the following sentence, "the birds began to fly away in ones and twos and larger groups. Soon the tree was empty", the tree may stand for Nigeria and the birds may represent the English people/colonizers, who leave Nigeria one by one after exploiting the country fully.

In the novel, there are also lizards. It is stated that the male lizard is ferocious and the female is coy. It is the microcosm of the sexual relationships among the living things. It is natural, male

¹ Ikem's, Chris', Sam's, and Beatrice's flawless English in the *Anthills of the Savannah* symbolizes the domination of the British culture upon the Nigeria culture.

is active and female is passive, but as human beings are supposed to be superior to the animals, they should be different. Accordingly, Beatrice is the active part in making love with Chris. She gives the command, she is the judge to decide whether he is worthy or not?

She said: Come in. And as he did she uttered a strangled cry that was not just a cry but also a command or a password into her temple... she had pulled him up and back with such power and authority as he had never seen her exercise before. Clearly this was her grove and these her own peculiar rites over which she held absolute power. Priestess or goddess herself? No matter. But would he be found worthy? Would he survive? (Achebe, 104)

In addition to the lizards, there are mosquitos and bed bugs, who suck the blood of the people just like Britain. Furthermore, there are elephants looking for water² and then sucking the juices stored in the years of rain by the tree inside its monumental bole (Achebe 193). In this scene, elephant can be taken as Britain and the tree as Nigeria due to the fact that Britain makes use of Nigeria's raw materials and natural sources for a long time.

Three green bottles may stand for the three young friends (Ikem, Chris and Sam). Chris recognizes that the end is approaching speedily. "Three green bottles. One has accidentally fallen; one is tilting. Going, going, bang!". Later on, Beatrice expresses that it is a coded message (Achebe 214). The last grin/gren, that is Chris dies with dignity, he was laughing at himself even at the face of death. With regard to death, there is another scene, in which a prince before the execution states that "I shall be born again". His words can be taken symbolically, especially considering that prospective leaders may continue to steal Money, which means that they will reincarnate.

In conclusion, symbols and images are made use of efficiently in order to convey the problems of postcolonial Nigeria by Chinua Achebe in the *Anthills of the Savannah*. Thus, the use of all these symbols mentioned above enriches the novel.

Works Cited

Primary Sources

1. Achebe, Chinua. *Anthills of the Savannah*. New York: Anchor Press, 1988.

Secondary Sources

1. Carroll, David. *Chinua Achebe, Novelist, Poet, Critic*. London: Macmillan UP, 1990.
2. Culross, Melissa. "Chinua Achebe's Biography and Style", <http://landow.stg.Brown.Edu/post/achebe/achebebio.html>. 2001.
3. Gelfman, Laura Pilar. "The Confluence of Religion and Economic Class in the *Anthills of the Savannah*" <<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/achebe/jlg1.html>> . 2001.
4. Gikandi, Simon. *Reading Chinua Achebe*. London: Massachusetts UP, 1991.
5. Smith, Jason M. "The Continuing Colonialism" <<http://www.postcolonialweb.org/achebe/contcol.html>>. 2001.

² Moreover, food becomes the symbol of the struggle for survival, and the symbol of the division of labor in the novel.