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## Timeless Themes in Achebe's *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*

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### Abstract

*The creative art, in whatever form, is a product of the artist who operates at a level higher and deeper than the ordinary mind. The writer, as often believed, is and remains the mirror, conscience, voice of vision and shaper of his society. His impact on humanity and society is eternal. The ideas encapsulated and projected in his work(s) transcends generations. One writer who exemplifies the immortal nature of art, even in death, is Chinua Achebe. In spite of the time he wrote, his works remain quite instructive on contemporary realities and at the heart of societal regeneration. Achebe's works unarguably offer critical perspectives on education, society, race, leadership, gender and other germane issues which perpetuate over generations and affect everyone. The essence of this study is to situate Achebe and some of his works within the ambits of 21st century ordeals and imbroglios in Nigeria. Two novels have been selected for critical analyses in establishing the timelessness of Achebe. The two novels are *Anthills of the Savannah* and *A Man of the People*. The study engages the sociological approach of literary interrogation in order to properly explore Achebe's undying relevance via his creative works' reflection and refraction of modern realities of the post-colony.*

**Keywords:** Chinua Achebe, Literary values, The Artist, Timelessness, 21st century

### Introduction

Chinua Achebe is one of the foremost African writers, whose footprint in the literary space and impact on humanity is indelible. He creatively weaved his writings in the service of man and reconstruction of society for the betterment of all. Achebe from his very first creative brainchild, *Things Fall Apart* and his subsequent novel *Arrow of God* argued for the suitable representations of black people and their culture. Achebe had once observed that by racial claim of universal literary canon, the West has “represented Africa in a very bad light, and now the time has come for Africans to tell their own stories” (ii) He uses the texts to correct nauseating miscreation/

misrepresentations of Africa and Africans as people without culture, values and norms. In Ernest Emeyonu's words [Achebe uses literature as] "a forum for addressing and redressing issues of education and mis-education in and about Africa" (xi). He therefore objects to miscreation of Africans and Africa projected in the works of Joyce Cary and Joseph Conrad through the novel genre. Charles Nnolim had the foregoing in mind when he comments about Achebe thus:

It was Achebe who made capital of what is indigenous in Nigerian literature and culture. And to him goes the credit as the inaugurator of the great tradition of Nigerian literature—that tradition which highlights the dignity of our manhood and our oral heritage. Achebe is the first and foremost concerned with cultural assertion and is a pioneer in what has come to be known as cultural nationalism in Nigerian literature, in stressing the dignity of the Nigerian man and woman, and in his concern with the rehabilitation of the image of the black man bruised and distorted by European writers. In sum, when all things are considered, we must all hark back to Achebe for what is great in the tradition of Nigerian literature – that tradition which promotes our awareness of what is really great and dignified in our culture, salted with the lilt of our local proverbs, the beauty in our traditions. In sum, the total rehabilitation of the image and dignity of the black man bruised and damaged the colonial master (40).

Here, Nnolim quite successfully highlights Achebe's conscientious artistic efforts in nurturing and sustaining a distinct canonization which has widely come to be regarded as Nigerian literature in English.

Just like his creative works of the time in retrospect, Achebe also uses critical writings to revive and project authentic and ideal images of Africa and Africans, distorted and swept under the carpet by the colonial masters. In his essay entitled "*An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's Heart of Darkness*", Achebe rejects, and puts right, colonial perceptions of Africa (1-10). Thus, in his initial writings, Achebe employs his craft in correcting the big and thorny issues that relegate the black man to the background and position of inferiority. Having combated, to a standstill, European denigration of the black man and in the face of negative happenings in post-independence, Chinua Achebe had to change his angle of focus. He beams his creative light on internal crises and realities making a mess of the hard-won independence, for which he sacrificed so much. This development which Abiola Irele calls "the new realism" eschews the earlier romanticism which was used to affirm and celebrate a special projected sense of uniqueness. It is marked by a continuation of the tradition of protest, this time, "against the African inheritors of the colonial

legacy of oppression" (80). H. H Okam corroborates the stance of Irele when he avers that

with the seeming departure of the white men from the centre of power, West African fiction has shifted emphasis from the usual themes of white oppression, degradation in morality, and the dilemma of culture-conflict to an introspective critical look at the society to portray the socio-political throes of Africa in the hands of Africans and reveal the anachronism that are some obsolete African practices" (57).

His critical consciousness changed from tackling external forces invading their world to the internal agents sustaining colonial ideologies and traits. Obviously, the pathetic state of affairs in post-independence Africa shaped his later writings, prior to his demise. Suffice to say that many issues which he creatively narrated/crusaded against are still very much in vogue. He is one writer whose works x-ray the suffocating socio-economic and political permutations of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigeria. This undoubtedly could be perceived as what informed Sunny Awhefeada's submission that "literature is a representation of a people's existence and worldview, their experience, past and present and in some cases the future" (369). This study is an exploration of the immortality of the artist and his works in lieu of contemporary dislocations hampering human and societal progress as imagined and created by Achebe in *A Man of the People* (1966), written in the immediate post-independent era and *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), published in the wake of Nigeria's military rule.

The study employs sociological approach to literary analysis as its framework. The sociological approach to literary works focuses on the relationship between literature and society, paying great emphasis on the social functions of literature. This approach views literature from a social context where writers can affirm or criticize certain societal values. As there is a reciprocal relationship between literary phenomena and social structures, sociological approach to literature proves useful to understand the socio-economic situations, political issues, the worldview and creativity of the writers, the relations between certain thoughts and configurations in which they occur and the determinants of a literary work. The theory is chosen to emphasize the timelessness/immortality of the artist and his work(s).

No doubt, the African literature maintains an intricate tie with its society and to remove the text from its context in the process of reading is to sever its essence. Lukas stresses the affinity between the novel and the society hence, a discussion of one invariably involves the other. He asserts that "society is the principal subject of the novel, that is, man's social life in its ceaseless interaction with surrounding nature which forms the basis of social activity and with the different social institutions of customs, which mediate

the relations between individuals in a social life”(16). The sociological approach situates the literary work within its socio-cultural context. In the words of Ojo Olorunleke, “it traces the relationship between a literary work [despite the era it was written] and society and insists that a literary construct is always conditioned by its environment (21) This relationship is so intrinsic to literary production that many critics find it hard to downplay the “social context as its referential and basis of intelligibility” (Akwanya, 1). A literary piece is therefore seen as a sociological document from which one interprets the past, present and more importantly the future of the society that induces it. Laurensen and Swingewood make the approach to literary exploration explicit when they summarized the role of the sociological critic thus: “[the role of the sociological critic] is not simply historical and social reflection [or refraction] in works of literature, but to articulate the nature of the values embedded within particular literary works” (16). Right from inception of African literature, the African writer, Achebe especially, has actively responded to the social, political, cultural and economic conditions of his time, but these issues addressed in his creative works have transcended time and space. The need to reinforce social values inherent in the works of Achebe as obtainable in contemporary times is what necessitated the use of this approach. This is in line with the position of Julie Agbasiere that the African novel, like other forms of African art is functional (71). The novel genre or its direct equivalent in whatever art form goes beyond the reductionist notion of Art for Art’s sake, a mantra highly publicized in Western literary canon. Tanure Ojaide takes us down the memory lane to fully account and appreciate the role being performed by literature during pre-literate era. He succinctly comments that “In African tradition, literature tends to be utilitarian rather than art for art’s sake” (41); and the African writer is always in tune with this societal obligation. It was the master storyteller himself (Achebe) who once cautioned the emerging African writer to be socially responsible or risks being just “like that absurd man in proverb who leaves his burning house to pursue a rat fleeing the flames” (78). Thus, “the postcolonial African novel is a site for the interplay of context and text” (Kehinde, 87).

Achebe’s literary works are mostly considered post-colonial literature, not because such imaginative works are created after independence of most African states, but because “they are written with the ink of art” (Okiri) to reveal his overwhelming preoccupation with the challenges of man in the modern world, many of which “have left man and society increasingly embattled and frustrated” (Sani 27). It must be noted that, Achebe’s *Magnum Opus* eschew straightjacket interpretative effort of the reader, as they are characterized by human tensions and aspirations across time and clime. His works embolden multiple themes that seek to depict the triple pictures of pro-colonial, colonial, and postcolonial conditions of Africans. Such issues are

mostly present and often overlap within the same novel, but it is just as often the case that one theme stands out above others in Achebe's writings. Given his trademark as postcolonial writer, Achebe's efforts are usually tailored towards highlighting the following principal themes commonly developed in postcolonial fiction: rebellion, struggle, and opposition against colonial powers, multiculturalism, and the establishment of cultural autonomy free from imperial forces.

### **Achebe's Timeless Themes and the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Nigerian Crisis**

As earlier noted, this essay aims at locating the timeless reverberations of themes in Achebe's craft. The timeless nature his works is hinged on his artistic excellence and social vision. Having published in nearly half a century or more, his works communicate ideas of lasting values and germane concern in contemporary times. The way and manner he weaves his stories and the ideologies encapsulated in them instigate the readers to embark on self-discovery and reformation. His works have continued to re-echo strong emotional, cultural and political messages for shaping society and humanity. Achebe's works can be located within a postcolonial matrix of the 21<sup>st</sup> century contentions. His creative engagements interrogate the Nigerian nation in the period after independence. No wonder Charles Nnolim avers that "no writer paints better than Achebe the Nigerian culture and political landscape" (40). He questions hegemonic practices that tamper the post-independent dream of a better life for all citizens.

### ***A Man of the People* and Political Stasis in Nigeria**

Achebe's *A Man of the People* captures the failings, aberrations and irregularities of the leadership class in Post-independent Nigeria. The novel opens with the narrator, Odili Samalu, awaiting the arrival of the Honourable Minister Chief M.A Nanga at Anata Grammar school, where Odili teaches. While the people welcome Honourable M.A Nanga to Anata, Odili exposes us to the failings of the government in delivering a progressive leadership. He observed this when he discloses that "the prices of gunpowder like everything else" has "doubled again and again in the four years since this government took control" (2). Also, while the people are exposed to life-threatening situations, poverty and lack through the feckless leadership piloted by the Chief M A Nanga and his cohorts, they (politicians) indulge in wasteful, flamboyant and misuse of public funds. Odili tells us that each minister has a gigantic apartment of seven bedrooms. Nanga even owns in addition, three thousand pounds, each in his wife's name. Odili, who belongs to the other side of the divide of society, on his visit to Chief Nanga, explains the luxury of his residence thus:

When I lay down in the double bed that seemed to ride on a cushion of air and switched on that reading lamp and saw all the beautiful furniture anew from a lying down position and looked beyond the door to the gleaming bathroom and the towels as large as lappa, I had to confess that if were at that moment made a minister, I would be anxious to remain forever (37).

The above luxury, contrasts sharply with the poverty in the country whereas in Giligili, the people are forced by wretchedness to share their little rooms with rats and poor sanitary conditions. For Chief Nanga and his collaborators politics is synonymous with eating and flamboyant living. Chief Nanga's invitation to Odili to leave teaching at Anata to come down to the capital to take up a strategic post in civil service in order for their people to press for their own share of the national cake reinforces the "eating" politics that Chief Nanga represents. Odili summarizes the politics of eating in a memorable valediction speech about the overthrow of corrupt politicians thus:

For I do honestly believe that in the fat-drip-ping gummy, eat-and-let-eat regime just ended-a regime which inspired the common saying that a man could only be sure of what he had put away safely in his gut or, in a language ever more suited to the times: "you chop, me self I chop, palaver finish",... (167)

The ugly picture painted by Odili cables our mind with pathetic condition of the masses as deprived and denied of the gains of independence. Achebe uses Chief M. A Nanga and his co-travelers to exemplify the excesses, unhealthy actions and inactions of the political class in the 21st century Nigerian society. The novel begins with an obvious exemplification of the exploitation of the masses, contrary to the pre-independence promise of equal opportunities for all.

The artist further showcases the intimidation/maltreatment of opposers of the greedy inclination of the political elites and cabals holding sway in government as obtainable in the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian leadership. A vivid example is the intimidation and deprivation of the people of Urua an unhindered access to clean water because one of their sons is a frontline aspirant in same election with Chief M.A Nanga and the people have vowed to pull their weight behind him by voting in en masse for him instead of Chief M. A Nanga, Minister of Culture, who they perceived an oppressor. Such dialectical rivalry has played out quite successfully during the formative years of Nigeria's independence where elections were largely conceived as propagandist obsession for consolidating ethnic supremacy. Readers can discern, of course with little effort, the replication of Chief Nanga's era in

contemporary Nigerian politics in spite of the visible advancement of 21<sup>st</sup> century in all ramifications – kudos to Achebe's prophetic vision of post independent African nations.

Achebe, in *A Man of the People*, further questions the decay and irregularities of the 21<sup>st</sup> century political engagements. He does this through satirization of the political ideologies projected by idealistic Odili and pragmatic Max. Odili, while in Nanga's house confidently affirms that if he were made a minister he would think of relinquishing his position. In the same vein, Max's acceptance of money from Chief Koko to step down for him during their campaign when we know that Chief Koko is not only his political opponent but one of those politicians he had written off as corrupt and anti-progress is reflective of the chameleonic nature of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Nigerian politicians. In spite of the visible lapses in Odili's and Max's logic in relation to overthrowing the anti-people's government, their resistance to the corrupt government paid off at the end through an enthronement of a new regime/government.

### **Ominous Prophecies in *Anthills of the Savannah***

Like *A Man of the People*, *Anthills of the Savannah*, even after twenty years, is still very much alive to contemporary happenings in Nigeria. Though it pays attention to the military era in Nigeria, it gives a glaring picture of the aimless leadership situations in Nigeria. The novel focuses on three friends - Sam Okoli, Christopher Oriko and Ikem Oshodi who are saddled with leadership responsibilities in a fictional state of Kagan. Achebe uses President Sam to exemplify leadership failure making a mess of post-independent Nigeria. We initially encounter the President of Kagan, Sam at a cabinet meeting with his commissioners. The picture of the President we are presented with at this meeting is that of an all-knowing dictator. His dictatorial tendencies are seen in his interaction with his cabinet members on matters of state. The President bluntly refuses to visit the drought stricken people of Abazon because they refused to vote, two years ago, in a referendum to make Sam a life president. Even when his friend and cabinet member, Oriko tries to persuade the President to visit and console them in their pathetic situation, he objects in an unintelligible manner thus: "But me no but, 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? On anything? (1)

The attitude of President Sam to the Abazonians and his cabinet members is symptomatic of the attitudes of Nigerian politicians to the masses who refuse to do their biddings or support their ambitions. This portrait of Sam depicts him as a military dictator and inept leader, who relies on brute force and violence to consolidate his leadership and power base. Also, those within his cabinet who oppose President Sam's dictatorial agenda are seen as



saboteurs or viewed as being jealous. He unleashes his angst on them. First, orders the suspension of Sam, the editor of the National Gazette. Later he fired him. Even though Ikem has been fired as the editor of the National Gazette, he refused to keep quiet. When Chris counsels him to be silent for some time in view of the tension in Kangan, Ikem says that obliging his friend would only heighten bad leadership in Kangan. He avers:

Rubbish, Chris, rubbish! The very worst prescription for a suspended editor is silence. That is what your proprietor wants because he makes reams of paper available to you he believes he owns your voice. So when he feels like if he withdraws the paper to show you how silent you can be without his help. You mustn't let him win (148)

In a bid for Ikem to change the suffocating leadership of Sam, he embarks on public sensitization via series of lectures. The lecture is held at the University of Bassa. During his eloquent lecture presentation, Ikem succeeds in securing the loyalty of the students to fight against the tyrannical leadership. Right from that moment, he initiates plan to have them eliminated. He sets his agent of destruction in motion. In the narrative, President Sam's terror machine is the State Research Council (SRC), managed by Major Johnson Ossai. It is this terror agent that frames and murders Ikem in cold blood. While running away from this same blood-thirsty machine, Chris meets his premature death at the hands of another state agent, the police. Through the terror agents, President Sam, just like a present day Nigerian leadership is able to silence dissident voices, holds sway and executes his parochial agenda in the fictional state of Kangan. Though Ikem dies in the struggle, we are quite aware that his efforts are not in vain. His campaign revolutionizes and reawakens the people's consciousness to the fact that a new Kangan is in sight. True to most classical works of art, Achebe's prophetic writings attest to his envious statue as rare creative genius with remarkable farsightedness of an oracle. This, he achieved in almost all his creative efforts starting with *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *Arrow of God* *There a Country* among others. *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah* are apt fictionalization of Achebe's position of the problem with post-independence Nigeria. Despite the fact that the texts were written so many years ago and the artist has taken a bow from the literary stage, his works are still very much reflective of Nigeria current precarious situations and decays.

The foregoing discourse suggests an approximation Kilam's stance on the social functions of African literature where he argues that "African writers...from the beginning, and especially since the early 1950s, perform a special obligation to the societies in which they function; they have determined that literature has a social function to interpret and educate society...That is, African literature speaks primarily for and to the people of

its own country, and express their hopes and fears and aspirations” (xiii). Of course, the 21st century Nigerian society is bedeviled with a catalogue of crises which unarguably have found copious expressions in the literatures before now, especially those of Chinua Achebe. Little wonder, he (Achebe) has always believed that the artist is a human being with “heightened sensitivities” who must “be aware of the faintest nuances of injustice in human relations” (Ojo Olorunleke, 65). This expressive view finds echo and elevation in Tanure Ojaide who comments inter alia thus, “In Africa a writer/poet is not only specially gifted person but also a gauge of his society’s conditions”. With this rare artistic ingenuity, the writer/poet is naturally considered to be “more perceptive than the man of common disposition, he sees through the surface of things, through what appears to the rest of the society as opaque” (1).

### Conclusion

Writers are ingenious inventors and creators of fictional realities. They are endowed with distinctive character that is derived from their literary tradition and sense of mission. They are more perceptive than the man of common disposition, hence they see through the surface of things, through what appears to the rest of society as opaque. Achebe epitomizes such rare attributes of an African writer. As the above propositions attempted to demonstrate, his works are still very much alive, representational and utilitarian to emerging issues of contemporary Africa. This reminds us of Ojo Olorunleke submission that “Achebe symbolizes the revolutionary wing of the Nigerian ruling class and in him and in his art are seen the contradictoriness of the Nigerian neocolonial state” (51).

Both *Anthills of the Savannah* and *A Man of the people* reflect modern-day realities, continuing crises and contradictions of the post-independent Nigerian state. The two texts connect the readers to a set of historical and other experiences germane to the restoration of sanity to humanity and transformation of society in all spheres. Undoubtedly, had Achebe published nothing other than *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savannah*, he still would have earned a distinctive place in the African literary canon as a prophetic oracle.

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