

Language and reality in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

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ABSTRACT: *Language can be described in terms of form (expression) and meaning (content). This work investigates aspects of Chinua Achebe's language in Anthills of the Savannah and reveals that life is full of intrigues and conflicts. Our focus is on how expression is artistically manipulated to inquire into the meaning of life in a contemporary African society. It reveals Achebe's instinct for appropriate metaphors and symbols and concludes that his combination of proverbial and pidgin patterning, including his language of lyricism, portrays life in a thoroughly African setting. Achebe's Anthills is so realistic that in analyzing it one is tempted to forget that it is a work of fiction.*

Introduction

Language is an abstract and arbitrary, independent medium that is productive and powerful for communication. John Lyons sees language as having the characteristics of arbitrariness, duality, semanticity, learnability and so on (2). Thus, language is a set of habit patterns that symbolizes certain things about reality. Edward Sapir is of the opinion that we reason about reality by using categories, and categories are expressed linguistically as words (20). In this sense, language is reality.

Is the reality we know, a reality imposed on us by nature? Is the reality and the meaning of life a creation of man? Certain individuals are of the opinions that love often gives meaning to our lives. Such a factor of happiness allows meaning into our existence. On the other hand, the cruelty of life has pain and death, including evil, as negative factors that are unfavorable to man. So, basically, it is between these two pendulums that many lives are lived. Thus, we see diverse and disagreeing sets of thoughts about the meaning and purpose of life.

Influenced by love as a direct source of life's meaning, Dalai Lama, a Tibetan spiritual and political leader explains life's purposes as the need to be happy because from the core of our being, man desires contentment. Marcel Proust likewise believes that life is sown with these miracles that only people who love can expect. The Greek poet, Homer (Century IX, b.c) however has a pessimistic philosophy about life when he says that mortals are insignificant as leaves that flourish from the earth and again fade away and die. This pessimism is reflected

in Conrad's *Lord Jim* where he reflects on the birth of a man by comparing it with falling into the sea. To Bernard Shaw. The Irish Writer (1856 1960), life is complex as it has two tragedies which are success and failure in achieving your hearts desires. The Danish writer, Hans Anderson (1805 1875) demonstrates in his writings this same sense of pessimism.

The diversity of opinions about the meaning of life necessitated the need for artists, linguists, dramatists, poets novelist and actors to inquire into the meaning of life through the written and spoken mediums of communication. Therefore, this essay demonstrates how Achebe's narrative of lyricism and natural speech inquires into life in contemporary Africa. Analyzing the language in *Anthills* reveals realistic facts or issues life has to offer: unprecedented betrayal, unrelenting struggle, power drunkenness, intrigues and conflicts in post Colonial Africa. Indeed, the text, through the writer's choice of linguistic techniques, presents life's endless list of conflicts. With just a glimpse of hope, pessimism and cynicism are observed as the author presents a record of reality, that is, the true situation and problems that actually exist in life contrary to how an individual would like life to be.

Looking at Achebe's language, the area of proverbial patterning for instance reveals a full range of the resources of Igbo tradition of eloquence. Bernth Lindfors says that the language of the head of the Abazon delegations reunites the reader (3-18) with traditional rhetoric based on proverbs. Gareth Griffiths in his article "language and Action in the Novels of Chinua Achebe" discusses his method of narrating in a language rich in metonyms and a treasure of transferred meanings (88-105). Lindfors posits that as an aspect of language, proverbs reiterate themes and local colour (50). Combining this patterning along side pidgin and the elements from the western tradition of a novel, gives us a hybrid tradition. Gikandi S. foregrounds Achebe's narrative strategies and ideology as key elements in a fiction like *Anthills* (56). This paper looks at how Achebe's literary expression reveals his originality which lies in his combining and fusing both African and western art forms (proverbs, pidgin and poetry) to evoke life's meaning in a typically African setting.

Proverbial Language Use In *Anthills Of The Savannah*

Ruth Finnegan defines proverbs as "a rich source of imagery and succinct expression on which more elaborate forms can draw" (398). Again, she states that in African Cultures, "a feeling for language, for imagery, and for the expression of abstract ideas through compressed and allusive phraseology comes out particularly clearly in proverbs" (390). Basically, proverbs are distinguished by terseness of

expressions that are suitable in situations of potential conflicts in life. Gerald Moore sees this hidden and oblique form of verbal communication as “the informing source and natural expression of the people's thoughts” (70).

Analyzing Achebe's proverbs in *Anthills* helps in examining how the artist uses this linguistic technique which refers to common human experience reality as an inquiry into the meaning of life. Proverbs as a rhetorical device are effective in a whole range of ways of life and they help to define responses in life where all other responses are inadequate. The philosopher and Roman poet, Lucretius, (98 -55 b.c) sees life as “a struggle in the dark”. That is, a struggle in a world full of conflicts and tensions. Therefore, Achebe advocates for non sectarianism in a world of religious diversities through the character of Elewa:

Well, if a daughter of Allah could join his rival's daughter in a holy dance, what is to stop the priestess of the unknown God from shaking a leg? (*Anthills* 224)

Elewa's uncle sums up this advocacy for peace between people of diverse religious beliefs in his prayer for the new born baby when he says that there should be no quarrel with “church people” and “mosque people” (*Anthills* 228). Learning to appreciate the inherent good in opposed religions like Christianity and Islam will help reduce post colonial tensions of the Nigerian state (Ojinmah Umelo 104). The proverb thus expresses Achebe's concern or strong opinion in non-sectarianism in principles of national importance.

We see a concern with man's nature, especially those in power, to forget the governed.

Their intentions are good, their mind on the right road. Only the hand fails to throw as straight as the eye sees. We praise a man when he slaughters a fowl so that if his hand becomes stronger tomorrow, he will slaughter a goat. May these young people here when they make plans for the world not forget it. (*Anthills* 224)

Here, we are made to understand that when an individual assumes a position of authority, he has good intentions. But Ojinmah notes that as has happened with the political legacy, “only the hand fails to throw as straight as the eye sees” illustrating the fact that both the civilian and military assumed office with good intentions but something went awry in the execution (104). This compressed and allusive phraseology ends in an advocacy for leaders in Africa to pay attention to the needs and desires of the governed.

On page 95 of *Anthills*, we see the use of animal imagery in the proverb below:

“It takes a lion to tame a leopard”.

This comparison which is evoked metaphorically suggests man's evil intentions towards man and his rapacious use of power to intimidate the governed. Achebe projects this idea in the character of His Excellency. Ojinmah observes a situations of the hunter and the hunted in this proverbs which is the debasing effect of naked power on both its wielders and their subjects (95). Therefore we are led to question reality. Is the reality and meaning of life a creation of man? Are all living beings just survival machines blindly programmed to preserve the selfish interest lead him to intrigues. One of such intrigues is that of the political. His Excellency's indignation towards power drunkenness propels him to unsuccessfully foist himself as president for life. This thought is concealed and embellished in the proverb:

Even when a man marries a woman, he does not marry her forever. (*Anthills* 126)

Such an over ambitions action blinds a man and prevents him from understanding the reality of life which the Roman poet, Homer (65 86. c) sees as short spanned, preventing us from entering our far reaching hopes and aspirations. A seemingly unfair reflection of reality is seen on page 127 of *Anthills*.

It is the place of the poor man to make a visit to the rich man who holds the yam and the knife.

In the above, we see a portrayal of the unhappy nature of the poor on life's stage. They have no option other than to succumb to the dictates of rich rulers who hold the basic social amenities of life. Refusal to give in to the whims and caprices of ruthless men in a world characterized by conflicts and intrigues may result in dire consequences. The death of Ikern by government officials best illustrates this point and demonstrates the vulnerability of man's existence. Achebe uses several proverbs to emphasize the danger of rebellion:

A wise man agrees with his wife and eats lumps of smoked fish in his soup. A fool contradicts his wife and eats lumps of cocoyam. (*Anthills* 225)

A man looking for something inside the bag of a man looking for something. (*Anthills* 189).

From the above, we see an intimidation of the people by leaders who cow the people that cannot condone the abuses and excesses they see. A fool disagrees with the corrupt and evil practices of soldiers turned politicians. Thus, ingratiating one's self with those in the helm of affairs will involve flattery, boot-licking and back biting.

Ikem's fiery editorials which aim at resorting some of the postcolonial tensions of the society make apparent government excesses. His willingness to undergo depravity rather than forsake his principles of reform eventually leads to his death.

If you want to get at the root of the murder... you have to look for the blacksmith who made the matchet. (*Anthills* 195)

The above proverb demonstrates the fact that solving problems like fraud and murder requires investigating the remote causes. This is because life's problems are deep rooted in intrigues, mysteries and puzzles. From the proverb, the word 'black smith' represents the detractors that is, the corrupt leaders that try to make life seem less enjoyable for the governed. The 'matchet' symbolizes the weapon of wielders used by these detractors for destruction. Reforming a society therefore requires starting from those in authority who typify and demonstrate the corrupting influence of privilege and power.

Page 123 of *Anthills* has a proverb whose analogy refers to the animal world:

It is the way the Almighty has divided the work of the world. Everyone and his own! The bush fowl her work, and the farmer, his.

Through the old man from Abazon, Achebe advocates that everyone has a part to play in the world depending on the gift apportioned to an individual. The various gifts which include the cry for war, the battle itself and the story thereafter are all of immense importance. These gifts are meant to be used judiciously to effectively resist the provocative fingers of rivals. The artist, in the person of Achebe artistically presents life's realities by manipulating the wit, attractiveness and deep insight of proverbs.

Pidgin in *Anthills of the Savannah*

A pidgin may be built from words, sounds on body language from multiple languages and cultures. It is a fundamentally simple form of communication. The grammar and phonology are as simple as possible consisting of certain traits like uncomplicated clausal structure (no embedded clauses, reduction of syllable coda, use of basic vowels (a,e,i,o,u), reduction and breaking of consonant clusters with epenthesis, no tones and lack of morphophonemic variation. In the words of Bernard Mafeni, the English based pidgin spoken in Nigeria is a lingua franca for many and thus a true pidgin ... defined as a mother tongue for a number of families" (95) Nigerian pidgin is a product of urbanization process with its origin lying historically in the early contact between Europeans and Africans. It is also referred to as 'broken'. Mafeni opines that Nigerian pidgin is complex as it exhibits variety in form and in function, from region to region" (97). Pidgin is commonly seen as a

debased form of English and not a language in its own right. This is consequent upon the fact that authorities discourage its use in public places. Therefore, pidgins usually have low prestige with respect to other languages.

In this essay, this section attempts to analyze the intended and extended meaning of the pidgin language with the aim of illustrating how Achebe successfully uses this linguistic standard to inquire into the meaning of life. The extended meaning is a sub-category of the contextual meaning (basics for stylistic meaning and linguistic pragmatics). According to Wale Adegbite, “extension of meaning can occur in the interpretation of the text based on different orientations of experience and ideologies of analysts” (69). The intended meaning or message is related to the theme which is interpreted in the light of the situational context of communication. Adegbite further explains that reducing the rhemes-part of a sentence or clause that adds new information to what we already know to one central point gives us the intended meaning (69).

Pidgin, in *Anthills* is a flexible and subtle linguistic device which serves to define and make obvious the realities of life. One of such realities is the intended meaning of the debasing and degrading role that life attaches to women. We see this through the character of Elewa who shows her displeasure at Mad Medico's action of fixing up His Excellency with a “warm friendly girl to cheer him up” (60). She comments thus:

“But woman don suffer
For this world-o”.

Intended Meanings Women are suffering in a world that sees them as insignificant mortals.

Extended Meaning: Life is cruel to women, ignores their well being and destiny and chauvinistically assigns to women the role that relegates them to a degree of irrelevance

Also, Elewa continues her lament with similar meanings:

“But woman don chop sand for this world-o” (60).

Intended Meaning: Women are ill- treated in life. This is interpreted in the light of the context of situation where we see the notorious posts and telegraphs man who batters his beautiful wife every night. The desk sergeant reacts nonchalantly to such ill- treatment. This demonstrates the undeserved irreverence accorded to women.

Extended Meaning: One of the challenges women have to face in life is that of male chauvinism.

“I no want make you join all the loose women for Bassa who no dey sleep for house”.

Intended Meaning: Only prostitutes spend the night in another man's house, not their own. Don't do it because you are not one of them.

Extended Meaning: From the above, we see the advocacy for the elevation of the status of women. Our choices should be guided by a strong sense of moral if we are to build a society not governed by class or status especially where the role of the woman is of a high degree of relevancy.

Achebe's vision of the role of women in time to come is also demonstrated in the statement made by Beatrice on page 222 of *Anthills'*.

“Na you go name am”

Intended Meaning: You are permitted to name the baby.

Extended Meaning: Here, we see Achebe's profound advocacy once again for women to be recognized in the society. In the voice of Beatrice, Achebe projects the view that women are capable of discharging certain social functions normally assigned to men Beatrice says, “in our traditional society, ... the father named the child but the man who should have done it today is absent “(*Anthills* 222). According to Ojinmah, the female principle of assigning a new role to women in the days ahead is “built around the premise of society's existent inherent reality And does not necessarily involve the original form of keeping women in reserve until the ultimate crises arrives...” (103). We also see the invocation of this female principle in the statement.

“Girl fit answer am also”

Intended Meaning: A female has the right and power to answer the name usually given to a male.

Extended Meaning: Women should have equal rights with their male counterparts.

Life in Kangan, the fictitious African nation, has certain incidents that illustrate reality. We see the depravity of man to whom human life has become worthless in the bestial act of a police sergeant attempting to rape a school girl in broad daylight; the thousands who laugh so blatantly at the humiliation and murder of civilians and finally, the I don't care attitude exhibited by the passengers who make no attempt to stop Chris's murder. Hence, Ojinmah notes that Achebe through the voice of Ikem sees the problems of African nations emanating from “the people the governed and the governors and not from the system” (102). In the words of the sergeant on page 213 of

Anthills, we see society's preference for a life void of such evil and decadence:

“ I go go England and negotiate with IMF to bring white man back to kangari”

Intended Meaning: I prefer the white man's rule. I will do what it takes to make sure they come back to kangari and colonize us.

Extended Meaning: Nigeria is not ready for independence as a result of incompetent leaders who lose touch with the reality of people's existence. This, there is the advocacy for a solution to the endemic tensions, conflicts and intrigues in life.

Achebe's Language Of Lyrics

The linguistic standard of lyricism in *Anthills* epitomizes reality through the qualitative undertones of imagery, metaphor, symbol, anecdotes and so on. We are presented with creative expressions of deep emotion on issues and experiences pertaining to life. For example, Ikem's satiric poem that ends his very first crusading editorial calling for the president to change some of his outrageous and revolting policies.

The worst threat from men of hell may not be their actions cruel. Far worse that we learn their way and behave more fierce than they. (*Anthills* 43)

Life is full of conflicts and intrigues and man is capable of escaping from suffering and servitude. From the above poem, we see the tendency of man to behave like men of hell. Ojinmah points out that human nature endows “individuals with the capacity to be good and at the same time exceedingly evil. This duality is present in every individual. Only one's resolve and circumstance determines where the balances will tilt, either good or bad (97). He further explains that “man will be surprised by his capacity for nobility, as well as villainy” (52). This is demonstrated in the person of His Excellency who attempts and fails to become life president.

Human beings have an insatiable thirst to be in positions of authority. Ikem's prose poem “The Pillar of Fire: A Hymn to the sun” expresses the fact that life has dire consequences for such desperate ambition. This warning is seen in 'power' which is personified as being arrogant and cruel in a world where everybody takes full responsibility for their own actions.

Wide eyed, insomniac, you go out at cock crow spilling malediction at a beaten recumbent world.

Your crimson torches of fire, the furnaces of heaven and the roaring holocaust of your vengeance fill the skies. (*Anthills* 30)

Here, we clearly see Achebe's portrayal of the effect of the concentration of too much power in an individual. In other words, we recognize the corrupting influence of privilege and power. Power here is described as an insomniac spitting malediction. That is, the effects of the sun power upon a world beaten down is full of curses and destruction. Those intoxicated by power move with vengeance, emblems of death and crimson (signifying blood) torches of fire to besiege a misguided and pitiful world. The metaphors: "bulging eye of madness; one wall neighbour to Blindness, 'wide eyed insomniac found in page 30 of *Anthills* clearly depict the effects of naked power on a man. Such effects Achebe sees as the causes of the underlying tensions in Nigerian society.

The complex simile in Ikem's hymn to the sun is given weight owing to the fact that the title of the text is drawn from this poetic prose poem:

The trees had become hydra headed bronze statutes so ancient that only blunt residual features remained on their faces, like ant hills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year's bush fires. (*Anthills* 31)

The complex simile above is a reflection of reality. *Anthills*' are not living trees, but are reminders of barely living trees which warn the 'new grass' of the danger of fire and scorching. *Anthills* are symbolic of life's martyrs who die in the course of fighting against corruption and injustice and whose memories linger on to warn the new grass' which symbolizes the on coming generation about the danger of fire and scorching sun' which is symbolic of the ruthless and callous in society. Ikem and Chris are life's martyrs (*Anthills*). Elewa's baby is the on coming generation and the 'fire and scorching sun' is His Excellency, Sam.

Achebe's description and characterization of His Excellency typifies the predatory use of power on his commissioners and its debasing effect on human beings. This is exemplified on page 3 of *Anthills* where Achebe dramatizes reactions of the commissioner for Education through the profuse use of animal imagery.

On my right sat the Honourable commissioner for education. He is by far the most frightened of the lot. As soon as he had sniffed peril in the air he had begun to disappear into his hole, as some animals and insects do, backwards. Instinctively he had gathered his papers ... dragging them into his hole after him when his entire body suddenly went rigid.

According to Ojinmah, this imagery "magnifies the impression of the hunter and the hunted, with the members of His Excellency's cabinet ... sniffing the air of any signs of dangers to avoid death" (95).

Hence, we see the tendency for even enlightened individuals to align themselves with the power drunk leaders and condone the corrupt practices present in society.

Conclusion

Language use in *Anthills* presents a vivid record of reality that is the true situation and problems that actually exist in life as opposed to how one desires it to be. This paper analyses Achebe's language with the aim of portraying reality. The use of multiple linguistic standards proverbial, pidginized and poetic forms are manipulated to inquire into a life that is characterized by socio-political conflicts, religious conflicts, disillusionment, misrule and intrigues. The essay demonstrates the fusion of myth and modern styles with the aim of explaining how language can be skillfully handled to inquire into the meaning of life reality.

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