

Art and Orthodoxy in Chinua Achebe's "Anthills of the Savannah"

CHELVA KANAGANAYAKAM

I am against everything
Against war and those against
War. Against whatever diminishes
th'individual's blind impulse.

DAMBUDZO MARECHERA, *The Bar-Stool Edible Worm*

TWENTY-ONE YEARS after the publication of *A Man of the People* (1966), Chinua Achebe published *Anthills of the Savannah*, perhaps his most enigmatic and complex work to date. The years separating these two works have been significant ones in the life of the author, for they entailed a deep concern with political turmoil, disillusionment with economic and cultural life, loss of friends and property, and an undying faith in the ultimate destiny of his country. All these sentiments find expression in the short stories, poems, and essays published in the 1970s and 1980s, particularly in his work of non-fiction, *The Trouble with Nigeria* (1984). It is thus not surprising that the novel that followed this period of upheaval (and the author's concomitant silence as a novelist) should be different in many ways, although the thematic preoccupations of the previous novels still persist. What has changed is the attitude to a historical process, and that in turn has necessitated a more experimental form, one that transcends the referentiality of his earlier works and lends itself to greater complexity and syncreticity of vision.

Responses to the novel have varied from unqualified admiration to disappointment and scepticism. Emmanuel Ngara, for instance, speaks of the author soaring "to the heights of literary

artistry" (128), and Elleke Boehmer claims that Achebe's "new vision is manifested in the strategic gender configurations of his central characters" (102). David Maughan-Brown is cautious about the ideology of leadership implicit in the novel and comments: "the solution Achebe's fiction here proposes to what its author sees as the problems afflicting contemporary Nigeria seem to me to be unlikely to have the durability of the anthills of the savannah, capable of enduring many seasons of grassfires" (148). The diversity of opinion points to the difficulties inherent in a narrative that self-consciously forges new directions.

Achebe has preserved a meticulous sense of historical continuum in his first four novels, beginning with the turn of the century in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and moving to the post-independence era in *A Man of the People* (1966). In between are *No Longer at Ease* (1960), which deals with the classic been-to predicament of disillusionment and *Arrow of God* (1964), a novel about a priest who refuses to change with the times.¹ *Anthills of the Savannah* confronts the present by focussing on the oppressive military rule in the West African state of Kangan. Continuities are also present at other levels, and the author himself draws attention to his previous works through intertextual references. Beatrice's mention of Chielo, the priestess of Agbala, is, for instance, a clear reference to the relevance of *Things Fall Apart* to this work. Both novels are concerned with the idea of a hero and the implications of death. The preoccupation with tradition and the symbiotic relation between values and ritual figure prominently in both *Arrow of God* and *Anthills of the Savannah*. A concern with the predicament of the been-to informs *No Longer at Ease*, and in some ways all the major characters in *Anthills of the Savannah*, like Obi Okonkwo, are victims of a colonial and alienating education. Despite ostensible differences in the political context, the same urge to build up the nation dominate the protagonists of both novels. The cynicism of Odili as he watches the machinations of Chief Nanga in *A Man of the People* parallels the disdain of Chris, the Commissioner for Information, as he watches the ministers debase themselves in the presence of the president in *Anthills of the Savannah*.

However, the artistic impulse that informs Achebe's early novels is a tendentious and celebratory one, which the author himself documents at various points. As a writer, Achebe sees his world not as a taxonomist "whose first impulse on seeing a new plant or animal is to define, classify and file away," and not as a taxidermist "who plies an even less desirable trade" (*Morning* 49-50), but that of a teacher, committed "to help [his] society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement" (*Morning* 44). He sees himself not merely as a social critic or historian, but as a teacher who seeks to remedy an internalized sense of inferiority. He comments that "although the work of redeeming which needs to be done may appear too daunting, I believe it is not one day too soon to begin" (*Hopes* 13). Abdul JanMohamed rightly points out that "the dilemma produced by colonialist praxis", namely "denigration and historical catalepsy" (178), leads Achebe to reject the acquired ontology and affirm the value of a culture that has been displaced and disprized. A concern with the conflict between two ontologies, as it manifests not only in a confrontation between the colonizer and the colonized but also in the inner contradictions and complexities of individuals and families, finds expression in the realistic mode. As JanMohamed observes:

Realism, then is his aesthetic as well as ethical response not only to colonialist views of African societies but also to the social dilemma of African cultures that are attempting to come to terms with the disorganization that is the legacy of colonialism. (178)

Anthills of the Savannah does not jettison this preoccupation. In fact it thrives on it by drawing attention to several manifestations of this conflict, including notions of exile, alienation and identity. Even more significantly, the novel draws heavily on the sentiments expressed in *The Trouble with Nigeria*. The points of contact between the two works are striking. Of the corruption in Nigeria, Achebe comments:

Nigeria is *not* a great country. It is one of the most disorderly nations in the world. It is one of the most corrupt, insensitive, inefficient places under the sun. It is one of the most expensive countries, and one of those that give least value for money. It is dirty, callous, noisy, ostentatious, dishonest and vulgar. (*Trouble* 9)

Ikem's speech to the students in *Anthills of the Savannah* captures something of the vituperative quality of these words. The problems confronting Igbos that the author discusses at length in his non-fiction are reiterated in the secessionist desires of Abazon in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Transformed into fictive terms, distanced by different names, the political context still remains that of Nigeria.

Also, the novel is, as Fiona Sparrow quite clearly demonstrates in her review of the novel, a memorial to Christopher Okigbo, who died fighting in the Biafran war; Achebe movingly captures his greatness in the phrase "headstone on tiny debris of passionate courage" in the poem "Mango Seedling" (*Christmas* 16-17) written in memory of his friend. That he chooses to call his protagonist in *Anthills of the Savannah* Christopher Oriko and have him die in Abazon opposing a mindless sergeant indicates that the author intends the parallels to be made clear to the reader. Achebe has called his friend "the finest Nigerian poet of his generation" (*Don't* 8), and this novel is a fitting tribute to his life. In short, the novel, in addition to its concern with a historical dialectic, becomes a version of truth to a much greater degree than his previous works, which draw on political and social reality without insisting on an identification between art and life.

All these factors lead to the expectation of a strikingly referential surface, at least to the extent of his previous novels. Despite the quality of orality, the repetitious structures and the metaphorical underpinning, the early novels remain very much in the tradition of realism. They are novels that, despite their ambivalence, affirm and celebrate an indigenous ontology. *Anthills of the Savannah*, on the other hand, departs from this mode by foregrounding narrative form and language, creating paradigms that both complement and subvert meaning and by exploring an experience that the reader perceives as all too real while accepting the fictionality of the text. The novel thus marks a point of transition, a point of departure by concerning itself with forms of reading and perception, and with structures that make meaning more elusive and complex. Insisting on the fictionality and autonomy of the text becomes an important strategy in occupying a more fluid space that straddles both the public and the artistic.

Interestingly, this is achieved, at least in part, by insisting on the political context and the sequentiality of the novel.

Despite the discontinuities and digressions, the reader never loses sight of the corrupt and corrupting political reality of Kangan. The secession of Abazon surfaces at various points, drawing attention to inner tensions and the fear of rulers. In fact, the novel begins with a delegation from Abazon to the Presidential Palace, and concludes (if one excepts the section on naming Elewa's daughter) with the death of Chris in Abazon. In between lies an attempt at sequentiality that insists on *Anthills of the Savannah* as a political novel about contemporary West Africa. Corruption, secret trials, jockeying for power and all the machinations of a corrupt political world provide the necessary backdrop for the text.

The political scene is seen as an inevitable aftermath of a historical process that involves acquired values, the role of the colonizer, and the values that colonization engenders. Repeated references to the colonizer departing with his luggage and leaving the colonized with half-formed ideas, a craving for power, and a desire to imitate the colonial master reinforce the suspicion that independence has been won only in principle and not in practice. The classic example of cultural conflict is evident in Sam whose studied mannerisms are described as an attempt to imitate an English gentleman of leisure. More specifically, images of the colonizer are present in Lou, the American journalist, and Mad Medico, the eccentric but astute hospital administrator. Lou is more overtly an exploiter, as is evident in her speech about how Nigeria should handle its economic policies, while Mad Medico is a more complex figure who combines a genuine regard for the African landscape with a contempt for the country's attempt to run itself and a penchant for essentialist statements. It is not without significance that his steward is called Sunday—recalling Friday. In Mad Medico's eulogies about the difference between England and Africa, and in Beatrice's skeptical comments about Mad Medico's double standards, the reader glimpses conflicts that have not been totally resolved, despite the departure of the colonizer.

These perceptions emerge as part of the *Weltanschauung*, in spite of the narrative that constantly parades its artifice, upsets the readers' expectations, and insists on its fictionality. The reader perceives this duality, and it is in the author's insistence on creating a form that works ostensibly against content that the uniqueness of the novel lies. As David Richards points out, the novel is "in part, an essentially optimistic manifesto of the power of 'the literary' in all its humanistic potential to offer an alternative epistemology to that of the state, another constellation of meaning and an arena for the outlawed disputation of political ideologies" (135).

Achebe's concern with form and the problematic nature of his endeavour become apparent in the metafictional comments he incorporates into his novel. In subtle ways, Achebe has found ways of commenting on his work even in his earlier novels. In *Arrow of God*, for instance, Edeogo is clearly an artist-surrogate. As Edeogo looks at the mask he has carved as it appears during a festival and wonders whether its features betray a weakness that he did not intend, and whether the response of the onlookers is a measure of his success, he is clearly meditating on the value and integrity of his art. And yet these comments are woven seamlessly into the novel, so that the reader perceives no disruption in the referentiality. *Anthills of the Savannah*, on the other hand, is more direct in its commentary. Soon after the humiliating episode with Sam at the Presidential Retreat, Beatrice feels the impulse to write, even at the expense of neglecting her routine chores. She is drawn by a frenzy to her writing about which the narrator comments:

The discarded pages and the nearly spoiled meat seemed like a necessary ritual or a sacrifice to whoever had to be appeased for this audacity of rushing in where sensible angels fear to tread, or rather for pulling up one of those spears thrust into the ground by the men in the hour of their defeat and left there in the circle of their last dance together. (83)

Here the distance between the immediate episode that occasioned the spurt of writing and language that draws on history, legend, and resistance foreground the metafictional comment. In a more specific manner, Ikem, the editor of the *Gazette*, ob-

serves that "a novelist must listen to his characters who after all are created to wear the shoe and point the writer where it pinches" (96). Later, after Ikem's speech to the students, the chairman, in an attempt to put out the fires caused by Ikem, says that "writers in the Third World context must not stop at the stage of documenting social problems but move to the higher responsibility of proffering prescriptions" and Ikem interjects with "Writers don't give prescriptions. . . . They give headaches" (161).

No longer is the role of the writer or the purpose of writing clear. If Beatrice's attempt is therapeutic in some way, Ikem's comment strongly opposes the pedagogical role of the writer. The idea of the writer as non-conformist is dealt with in greater detail, with classic irony, in the episodes involving Mad Medico's friend and visiting poet, Dick, whose language and description of his magazine *Reject* clearly indicate the limitations of the kind of criticism that the visiting poet espouses.

As unclear as the objectives of writing are the forms that could express a complex vision. Beatrice, having alluded to the many strands—such as Christian, African, white, black—that make up her world, comments:

World inside a world inside a world, without end. *Uwat'uwa* in our language. As a child how I thrilled to that strange sound with its capacity for infinite replication till it becomes the moan of the rain in the ear as it opened and closed, opened and closed. (85)

Her world, like a Chinese box, holds multitudes, and like the experience in the novel, needs a form that would contain it. A little later, the bearded old man talks about the significance of the storyteller:

The sounding of the battle-drum is important; the fierce waging of the war itself is important; and the telling of the story afterwards—each is important in its own way. . . . But if you ask me which of them takes the eagle-feather I will say boldly: the story. (123-24).

Having affirmed the significance of the story, the old man concludes by recounting a tale which deals with the leopard and the tortoise—one which makes a tremendous impact on Ikem—about how the tortoise, moments before its death at the hands of the leopard, asks for a few moments to scratch the sand furiously

to create the impression of a struggle. Here again is the notion of pretence, of fiction, a leap of the imagination that transforms the reality of defeat into something ennobling and positive.

The metafictional comments alert the reader to problems of form, of embedded paradigms that question and subvert and pose dualities in the novel. Paradigms of detection and legality appear very early in the novel, signalled by the titles of two chapters, namely, "First Witness" and "Second Witness." The structures suggest ways of reading and artistic intent, patterns of disclosure and gradual peeling away of layers until the truth is revealed. The pattern is reinforced by the various episodes of questioning and interrogation that take place in the novel, each time with the intention of arriving at the truth. Sam, at the beginning, questions two of his ministers to ascertain the truth about Chris's integrity. Police officers question Ikem, again ostensibly to get details about the parking offence. Beatrice undergoes a similar experience when her house is raided. When Chris disguises himself and attempts to leave Bassa, he is questioned by a soldier who wants to see if Chris is who he claims to be. Significantly, each time the attempt to arrive at the truth fails, thereby questioning the validity of the paradigm as a vehicle for probing the truth. Sam, for instance, totally misunderstands the integrity of his friends, which eventually leads to a series of rash decisions and his final downfall. The soldier believes Chris's fiction about selling motor parts and fails to perceive the truth. Significantly, the only person who sees through the disguise chooses not to expose Chris until after the shooting. Ironically, Chris succumbs to what he seeks to avoid by getting shot, but that is not a result of anyone discovering his true identity. Not unlike the story of the tortoise and the leopard, it is invariably the semblance of truth, the pretence, that appears to be significant. The legal process of questioning witnesses and examining evidence proves futile in the context of the novel.

The paradigm of legality leads to notions of judgement, with which the novel is so insistently concerned. Here again, judgement is perceived to be faulty. Ikem and Chris are both judged to be traitors and punished. The elders from Abazon are misjudged and arrested while Abazon is ostracized. Mad Medico is hastily

deported for no valid reason. The structures that one would expect to support a referential reading now become suspect.

The paradigm of detection is reinforced by the process of providing clues rather than answers to the various mysteries in the novel. Anonymous phone calls, coded messages, nuances of expression promise greater revelation when the layers are finally peeled away. The anonymous phone calls, contrary to expectations, turn out to be those of a sympathetic officer. Chris's final words "The last green" allude to a private joke of no great significance except to Beatrice. The end of the novel is always predictable—in fact it is predicted by Beatrice in one of her visionary moments—and the various structures that promise meaning through a gradual process of disclosure are, in fact, deliberately rendered inadequate.

This process of subversion is underlined by the technique of revealing effects before the causes are examined. On the one hand, events are foretold long before they occur. On the other, incidents like the suspension of Ikem are mentioned before the events leading to it are revealed to the reader. In both cases, the narrative departs from its ostensible pattern of disclosure and sequentiality. In some ways, the novel works against itself by creating expectations only to subvert them. As Ikem points out in a slightly different context, drawing attention to the difficulty of leaning on absolutes, "all certitude must now be suspect" (99).

It is thus not surprising that the novel is so wilfully discontinuous in its account of the various events that take place. Climactic episodes, once they occur, are abandoned for several pages and picked up when the intensity of the moment is no longer felt by the reader. Beatrice's confrontation with the president, which the reader knows is bound to have its consequences, is abandoned for the next twenty-five pages, and continued only after a detailed account of Beatrice's life and her relations with Ikem and Chris. The intervening episodes are crucial to an understanding of the novel, but they do disrupt the linearity of the novel. At the beginning of *Anthills of the Savannah*, the reader is given an elaborate account of Ikem attempting to reach the Presidential Palace (for reasons unknown) in the midst of heavy traffic, and the causes and consequences are left unexplained for

several chapters. The discontinuity has the effect of distancing the realism and compelling the reader to look at the synchronic axis in order to perceive complexities of meaning.

The constant interruptions to the linear narrative lead to what is perhaps a very significant aspect of the novel, namely, the strategy of presenting a series of micro narratives, linked together tenuously by the thread of sequentiality. The narratives are spoken by various voices: Chris, Ikem, Beatrice, and an unnamed omniscience. Each voice presents its own way of telling the narrative, thereby establishing its uniqueness and looking at various ways of dealing with the text. Interestingly enough, the president, who is a long-standing friend of the main characters, and who determines the events in the novel, is never made a narrator. He becomes the object of much discussion, and the reader hears conflicting tales about him, but his voice is never available. It is almost as if parts of the puzzle are deliberately left out for the reader to fill in.

Chris's voice, in keeping with his professed desire to remain "reasonable" at all times, is the voice of common sense looking somewhat sceptically, even cynically, at the contradictions of the present from the point of view of one who belongs to the establishment. His is the voice of the critic who chooses not to become an exile. In fact, he declares that he prefers the charade of the present over the option of lecturing in foreign lands about the oppression of his homeland. His voice, then, focusses on the present and strengthens the referentiality of the text. In some ways it is appropriate to have him do so, for he is in some ways a fictionalized version of Christopher Okigbo, whose presence in the novel mediates between historical circumstance and fictional text.

Ikem's narrative is unpredictable, for as the editor of a leading newspaper one would expect him to be committed to current affairs. Yet he deals with abstractions, more like a poet than an editor. On one occasion, he relates a story of public executions in a manner that recalls Achebe's poem "Public Execution in Pictures" (*Christmas* 60-61). While Achebe's poem is largely descriptive, Chris's version, which is far more complex, serves as a frame for the entire narrative. He claims his story to be real, but his

narration flaunts its textuality and thus suggests the artifice of the entire narrative. The execution he describes involves four thieves, one of whom is dressed like a prince. The clothes worn by the prince are reminiscent of the president while the execution itself has obvious parallels with the crucifixion of Christ. The prince's final words "I shall be born again," reminiscent of Nicodemus, underscore the religious dimension of the novel, while the reference to four thieves clearly alludes to Sam, Chris, Ikem, and Mad Medico, all of whom are either killed or deported in the course of the narrative. If the scene is intensely real in its evocation of disgust and horror, it is also fictive in the manner in which it foretells the future and serves as a frame. Ikem's narrative, like that of Beatrice and the omniscient narrator, leads the narrative away from the immediate context into one that is non-linear and metaphoric.

Both the omniscient narrator and Beatrice employ a frame of reference that includes the referential and the mythical and a species of language that ranges from pidgin to standard English, all of which enable them to move freely in two worlds—the metonymic and the metaphoric. This fluidity of movement is at its best when the focus is Beatrice. Fiona Sparrow's comment that "Beatrice is the most important female character that Achebe has created" and that the "modern Beatrice" is "also a goddess and a muse" (58) alludes to the complexity of her portrayal. The multiplicity of her role comes through at various points, often through the language that intervenes between the actual event and the metaphoric subtext.

This duality is central to the design of the novel. At the referential/metonymic level, she is the promising civil servant, the pride of the nation, the headstrong "been-to," and the angered and disappointed lover. At this level, she is contemptuous of the visiting journalist, sceptical of Mad Medico's cynicism, and defiant of traditional notions of marriage. Her career, in referential terms, proves to be far from successful, and she is seen as a victim not merely of a corrupt political regime, but also the entire process of colonization. It is, however, at the metaphoric level that the significance of her portrayal becomes evident. Here is Beatrice's description of her "seduction" of the president:

And was I glad the king was slowly but surely responding! Was I glad! The big snake, the royal python of a gigantic erection began to stir in the shrubbery of my shrine as we danced closer and closer to soothing airs, soothing our ancient bruises together in the dimmed lights. Fully aroused he clung desperately to me. And I took him then boldly by the hand and led him to the balcony railings to the breathtaking view of the dark lake from the pinnacle of the hill. And there told him the story of my Desdemona. (81)

Sam's essentialist assertion that "African chiefs are always polygamists" and his loss of self-respect in the presence of the American journalist, combined with Beatrice's recollection of having been abandoned by a boyfriend as a result of what is called the "Desdemona complex," are occasions for this impulsive act of humiliating the president. And yet the language insists on the mythical dimension of the episode, alluding to the goddess Idemili, the dark lake from which she rose, her punishment of a lascivious chief through the python, all of which are documented in the section entitled "Idemili." She herself is not entirely conscious of the mythical dimension, but she is aware, she declares, that "[s]omething possessed [her] as [she] told it" (81). Now she is an emblem of tradition, an angry goddess, a prophetess and a priestess.

Soon after her humiliation, she is visited by Ikem in circumstances that are not unlike a similar episode in England when Ikem, in response to a telephone call, braves the weather to visit her. Now the language distances the narrative and suggests the mystical/mythical element. Ikem comes "barging into a pillar of rain" to sing the praises of Idemili. This time Beatrice offers no shelter in her home, and Ikem, after having read his "love poem," which he calls the gift of insight, leaves, and both are aware that the parting is forever. Ikem goes as it were to obey the dictates of the goddess, leaving behind "twitches of intermittent lightning and the occasional, satiated hiccup of distant thunder" (101). The narrator in the next section rightly points out that "Ikem alone came close to sensing the village priestess who will prophesy when her divinity rides her" (105).

Beatrice, however, is not done with her role. In response to the question posed by a bird—"Is the King's property correct?"—she responds, "You have not heard the news? The King's treasury was

broken into last night and all his property carried away" (108), drawing attention to her "seduction" of the president, who, one remembers, is described as a "moral virgin" by Mad Medico. But Beatrice, as goddess seeking revenge, goes even further. She entices Chris in a scene in which once again the language intervenes between event and fictional text:

From there she took charge of him leading him by the hand silently through heaving groves mottled in subdued yellow sunlight, treading dry leaves underfoot till they came to streams of clear blue water. More than once he had slipped on the steep banks and she had pulled him up and back with such power and authority as he had never seen her exercise before. (114)

The consummation is described in terms that resemble an archetypal quest, an initiation into a different realm. Beatrice herself comments that she is like Chielo, the priestess and prophetess of the Hills and the Caves. From this moment, Chris ceases to be "reasonable" and is quickly involved in the overthrow of the government. The consummation leads to a commitment against the political regime and eventually leads to death. He becomes, in a sense, the instrument of punishment for Sam, while becoming a victim himself for abandoning Beatrice in her moment of need.

She is both goddess and priestess, the source of authority and the witness, one who knows and does not know. The ambiguity is central to the novel for the death of Chris leaves Beatrice devastated, and when she recovers the narrator comments:

It was rather the ending of an exile that the faces acknowledged, the return of utterance to the sceptical priest struck dumb for a season by the Almighty for presuming to set limits on his omnipotence. (220)

Beatrice's narrative includes a "love poem" written by Ikem about the plight of women who are either forced to bear the burden of guilt or become objects of veneration—either way rendered irrelevant in the process of running the world. Symbolically, the poem captures the paradox that relates to Beatrice. Ikem pays tribute to this complexity in an important passage:

Those who would see no blot of villainy in the beloved oppressed nor grant the faintest glimmer of humanity to the hated oppressor are partisans, patriots and party-liners. In the grand finale of things there

will be a mansion also for them where they will be received and lodged in comfort by the single-minded demigods of their devotion. But it will not be in the complex and paradoxical cavern of Mother Idoto. (100-01)

At this level, Beatrice is the goddess in whom are enshrined the values of a culture. She is the source of nourishment and nemesis, the daughter of the almighty who was created "to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around Power's rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty" (102). At the end of the novel, her character undergoes yet another transformation as she decides to hold a naming ceremony for Elewa's daughter, and dismissing the claims of tradition, names the child herself. The name she suggests—Amaechina (Ama for short)—is, as the characters point out, both masculine and feminine. The subversion of tradition is caused by the symbol of tradition. The ceremony takes place accompanied by a dance that includes Muslim, Christian, and African elements. As Beatrice herself comments, "if a daughter of Allah could join his rival's daughter in a holy dance, what is to stop the priestess of an unknown god from shaking a leg?" (224). The multiplicity of the novel, the fusion of black, white, religious, secular, African, and European finds expression at the end, leading to a new beginning. The transformation recalls Achebe's comment in an essay entitled "The Igbo World and Its Art" where he says: "It stands to reason, therefore, that new forms must stand ready to be called into being as often as new (threatening) forces appear on the scene" (*Hopes* 43).

Beatrice, in fact, is as much Classical, Indian, and Christian as she is African. The Christian element is pervasive in the novel, and its complexity is hinted at the very beginning in the title "First Witness." The thread is picked up in the execution, in the references to Esther, the pillar of salt, the Book of Genesis, and the New Testament. Beatrice as the pillar of salt is likened to Lot's wife (which recalls Mad Medico's graffiti about Sodom and Gomorrah), and in her role as seductress a courtesan in the Indian temples, and as an unattainable lover and the object of quest and adoration, none other than Dante's Beatrice.

The non-referential, mythical dimension of the novel persists right through to the end, even in the latter part which lends itself so readily to a linear, sequential reading. It is significant that as Chris makes his plans to escape, two others—Emmanuel and Braimoh—join him, making a party of three and filling the spaces created by the absence of Ikem and Sam. Three continues to be a magic number, with Emmanuel giving Chris three kola nuts—a trivial detail that turns out to be significant when the latter is questioned by the soldier—and Chris's last words refer to a private joke involving three green bottles. The symbolic reading prompted by the symmetry is reinforced by the three enigmatic inscriptions on the bus. The inscriptions suggest notions of guilt, suffering and redemption, all of which suggest that the journey is as much one of self-discovery as it is of escape. The journey needs to be seen in relation to Ikem's "Hymn to the Sun," which, unlike Donne's poem, is a hymn of lovelessness, dispossession, and loss of tradition. It describes a landscape through which Chris now travels, one in which the trees are stunted, like "anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year's brush fires" (30). Here Chris discovers himself in a final heroic gesture. Interestingly, the description of the scene concludes with a struggle in the sand between the Braimoh and the brutal strength of the sergeant, an encounter that is strongly reminiscent of the tale of the tortoise and the leopard. The juxtaposition underlines the relation between truth and art with which the novel is concerned, and which Achebe defines elsewhere as the truth of fiction: "Art is man's constant effort to create for himself a different order of reality from that which is given him, an aspiration to provide himself with a second handle on existence *through his imagination*" (*Hopes* 95-96).

In the final analysis, the novel defies easy classification. If, in the manner of the earlier novels, it deals with issues of contemporary relevance, it does so in a manner that projects ambiguity. While the novel does not abandon its pedagogical role, it refuses to take shelter in orthodoxy. Chinua Achebe's role as artist supersedes that of teacher. If a mimetic mode and a readily

identifiable binary of ruler and ruled inform the previous works, an experimental form and an ambivalent subjective stance characterise the recent one. The writer is not removed from socio-political concerns, but the involvement is predicated on artistic distance. Inevitably, this space prevents a wholehearted endorsement of and alliance with power brokers. As Ikem points out, “a genuine artist, no matter what he says or believes, must feel in his blood the ultimate enmity between art and orthodoxy” (100). If the novel creates paradigms of reading only to subvert them, structures of realism only to disown them, it is because the novel is in many ways a charting of new territory, an exploration of the process of writing and the role of the artist in relation to the contemporary postcolonial reality about which he must write. Beatrice’s seemingly innocent response to Ikem might well be one that Achebe, confronted with the complexity of postcolonial Nigeria, would reiterate: “wetin be my concern here?” (90).

NOTES

- 1 Griffiths, in his article that deals with the “missing volume” in Achebe’s trilogy, discusses the hiatus as “the difficulty within the hybridized poetics of a post-colonial literature of formulating the revolutionary public consequences of the personal ‘betrayals’ of those transitional figures who straddle the period of cultural onslaught and change” (21). While it might be far-fetched to assert that *Anthills of the Savannah* is the missing volume, it could certainly be argued that this novel attempts to deal with the difficulties in filling the lacunae.

WORKS CITED

- Achebe, Chinua. *Christmas in Biafra and Other Poems*. New York: Doubleday, 1973.
- . *Morning Yet on Creation Day*. London: Heinemann, 1975.
- . *Don’t Let Him Die: An Anthology of Memorial Poems for Christopher Okigbo 1932-1967*. Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishers, 1978.
- . *The Trouble with Nigeria*. London: Heinemann, 1984.
- . *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays*. London: Heinemann, 1988.
- . *Anthills of the Savannah*. London: Pan Books, 1989.
- Boehmer, Elleke. “Of Goddesses and Stories: Gender and a New Politics in Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*.” *Kunapipi* 12.2 (1990): 102-12.
- Griffiths, Gareth. “Chinua Achebe: When Did You Last See Your Father?” *World Literature Written in English* 27.1 (1987): 18-27.
- Lodge, David. *The Modes of Modern Writing: Metaphor, Metonymy, and the Typology of Modern Literature*. London: Edward Arnold, 1977.

- Maughan-Brown, David. "Anthills of the Savannah and the Ideology of Leadership." *Kunapipi* 12.2 (1990): 139-48.
- JanMohamed, Abdul. *Manichean Aesthetics: The Politics of Literature in Colonial Africa*. Amherst: U of Massachusetts P, 1983.
- Ngara, Emmanuel. "Achebe as Artist: The Place and Significance of *Anthills of the Savannah*." *Kunapipi* 12.2 (1990): 113-29.
- Sparrow, Fiona. Rev. of *Anthills of the Savannah*. *World Literature Written in English* 28.1 (1988): 58-63.
- Veit-Wild, Flora, ed. *Dambudzo Marechera 1952-87*. Harare: Baobab Books, 1988.