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Freedom but No Freedom: A Study of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Abstract

The novel *Anthills of the Savannah* written by the father of African literary renaissance Chinua Achebe in 1987, exhibits political turmoil, tyranny and native rulers' thrust for power leading the civilian life into dismay. Sam, a colonel in Military, headed the coup d'état against the corrupt civilian regime in the novel for an attempt to put off ever growing unrest. Sam, in his new position as President of Kangan, wanted to reform the regime but succumbed to the colonizers style of govern. The fictitious place Kangan representing Nigeria in reality is attempted to mirror the true freedom what is expected by Nigerians and what was given to them after independence in 1960 is sketched in the article with reference to the last fictional master piece by Achebe.

Keywords

Chinua Achebe; *Anthills of the Savannah*; Kangan; Nigeria.

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*“For to be free is not merely to cast off one’s chains,
But to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others”*
- Nelson Mandela

Power, pride, ambition, money and a few other reasons drove white men to conquer many a land such as Nigeria. Various inevitable causes led to give away the so called freedom back to the natives but with lots of constraints and influence of their boorish backdrop over their heads, which is in a way to say that once colonized are still in virtual cuffs and shackles.

Whites claim to be the beacon stars for the worldly wisdom and enlightenment of others whom they colonized. However, there is also an undisputable impression of whites’ influence, which is prevalent in the manners and in stern ruling of many a country by the subsequent and immediate rulers who so ever ushered to the position of rulers during post-colonial era. All of these immediate descendants of colonizers failed in taking steps to enhance the freedom of their fellow men that are there with them in the country and in respecting their motives for the good cause.

In the context connection with *Anthills of the Savannah*, a situational novel and the last fictional master piece by Chinua Achebe, portrays to the world outside Nigeria, the indelible colonial effect on the rulers and their unyielding ruling style in postcolonial Africa. After twenty years gap of writing *Man of the People* in 1964, Achebe carefully sketched the conditions present during the aftermath of military coup that toppled civilian rule in free Nigeria. Chinua Achebe, who is regarded as father of African literature in English was known for his use of rather Africans use of story-telling as a narrative device.

Achebe unleashed the same technique with a blend of modern use of English of his time to emphasize the motives of every man in Africa particularly and every single human who were under colonial rule for some time and made broadly to respect each other's freedom to lead a comfortable life without strife. With this preface the present paper is written to bring to lime light the actual freedom which was depicted in the novel from which one can infer the change expected in the society for the betterment in Achebe's postcolonial Novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*.

Sam, one of the leading characters of the novel, as a boy, who wanted to become doctor changed his opinion after listening to his school English teacher to become soldier there by succeeding in becoming Second Lieutenant in the Army; ADC and proceeded to become the Governor-General; Royal Enquiry during the Queen's visit; rose to the rank of Officer Commanding at Independence; took responsibility as Colonel at the time of coup over the upset Civilian regime; and culminated to be the General and His Excellency, the Head of the State of Kangan, a fabricated Place by Achebe in the novel resembling Nigeria in reality. Sam in the novel represents epitome of power mongering and tyranny.

Sam was backed initially by Chris Oriko and Ikem Osodi, two childhood friends who expected the social change through the decrees of their childhood friend. But the tyrannical tendencies of Sam lead the lives of Kangans, Abazons and Bassas wretched alongside giving raise to commotion in the minds of all eleven Cabinet ministers of the state including the repented duo over their wrong stand to support Sam.

I could read in the silence of their minds, as we sat stiffly around the mahogany table, words like: Well, this is going to be another of those days. Meaning a bad day. Days are good or bad for us now according to how His Excellency gets out of bed in the morning. On a bad day, such as this one had suddenly become after many

propitious auguries, there is nothing for it but to lie close to your hole, ready to scramble in. And particularly to keep your mouth shut, for nothing is safe, not even the flattery we have become such experts in disguising as debate. (Achebe 2-3)

Every cabinet minister is panic-stricken and has no courage to meet the eyes of the president to say that his choice to not to pay a visit to Abazon or turning down their request to supply water to the drought prone place is wrong. This sloppiness of the present ruler invites detest and lets it grow more which is not good for the regime in the long run for its sustenance of the government.

Ministers in the cabinet in general are known for their administration, law making, representing the motives of people and arbitrating the issues if any to the civilians. However, power blinds the reckoning and absolute power blinds reckoning absolutely. Having no freedom to express one's personal opinion over what is happening around the country is screening the tyrannical and ruthless behavior by the cabinet ministers. The position of a common person like, a rickshaw-puller, shopkeeper, government official, and old brood of the country who wish to speak out their opinions to better the functioning or point out the anomalies of the Sam's regime was even more miserable.

Charlotte Baker in her article, analyses the postcolonial government of the 1st président of free Guinea, *Ahmed Sékou Touré (1958-1984)* based on the works of Camara Laye, Alioum Fantouré, Tierno Monénembo and Williams Sassine and a few other authors from postcolonial Africa and remarked in the context of Independent Guiana rulers by natives. "As violence became synonymous with the state and its regime of terror, Guineans lived in an unpredictable world, in which any gesture might be interpreted as offensive to the regime and result in their incarceration or death."

The common feature with all the postcolonial rulers who came to reform their respective regimes did not detach from colonial influence in ruling style

and in the thrust to retain power, resorting to violent and atrocious means. As a result many a people from decolonization period to recent past were feeling, that, the rulers changed, color of the rulers changed but not the ruling.

In the context of the novel *Anthills of the Savannah*, Sam or His Excellency has the tendencies of Ahmed Sékou Touré, who initially was admired for his socialist revolutionary policies in the wake of colonial domination in Guinea but love to retain power drew out dictator in him who brutally trampled resistance over his government after he came to rule.

Similarly, Sam, an armed staff, who vigorously supported the military coup, led it to overthrow the then civilian regime in Kangan due to its dishonest and unmerited methods of decree. But Sam, embarked on the same method after he came to the power and curbed the freedom of people. Ikem Osodi, another leading character in the novel, was made Chief of National Gazette, a newspaper, which curtailed its freedom of expression in print after Chris was dragged to Cabinet and was given the post of Minister of Information. Chris is to assist Sam in his newly acclaimed position to govern the country well and put off the unrest prevailed due to civilian government's bureaucratic administration but only to witness the power slipping in the hands of aristocratic monarch, which was even worse than the previous.

Ikem, represented a rebellion over stern government in the novel for a noble cause that is to get true freedom and make everyone feel equal in the modern regime. Chris who also has the same opinion but suffers with two insides i.e. accepting blindly what His Excellency dictates him to do loudly but silently detesting it and hoping for a better tomorrow.

In chapter 3, Ikem, was prescribed to show the text before it was published in the newspaper regarding, the news coverage of 'Abaganian Congregation' meeting Prof. Okong on behalf of the President. It was at this point of time Ikem and Chris had a heated debate, Ikem questioned the present government thrashing on the fourth estates free will, contrary Chris sounded

and acted bossy which irked Ikem but eventually Ikem succumbed to the might. Ikem was a good writer, columnist and a poet. He in fact believed in 'pen is mightier than sword'. When Ikem was struck due to traffic jam on his way to presidential palace under scorching sun and when he failed to be on the news coverage draft approval from Chris, he wrote a hymn reflecting the present friction exerted on him and the country in general.

Great Carrier of Sacrifice to the Almighty: Single Eye of God! Why have you brought this on us? What hideous abomination forbidden and forbidden and forbidden again seven times have we committed or else condoned what error that no reparation can hope to erase? (Achebe 28)

In the opening remark of the hymn, author was heavily lamenting and expressing his anguish over the condition of Kangan by questioning god above for the predicament. Nigeria was declared free in 1960 which contemplated various plans for renaissance of the countries glory but due to British like ruling in free Nigeria gave rise to Military coup d'état in 1966 followed by another coup in the same year which eventually started Nigerian Civil War in 1966 is symbolically represented with the use of the word 'forbidden' thrice in the passage above. The same use of 'forbidden' thrice is also embodied for showing the minute detail of Military coup d'état that was executed by military personnel in three places in 1966 at Kaduna, Lagos and Ibadan. Maj. Kaduna Nzeogwu, who was the Chief Instructor at the Nigerian Defense Academy in Kaduna; Maj. Emmanuel Ifeajuna, the 2nd Brigade in Lagos; and Capt. Emmanuel Nwobosi in Ibadan were the coup plotters.

This revolting outrage continued to raise its dirty head at periodical intervals since 1966, to the time Achebe happened to write this novel in 1987, at an alarming rate nearly seven coups were executed to overthrow one government after another in the budding Independent Nigeria enormously

keeping civilian's life at crisis, even this has been hinted in the opening paragraph of Ikem's hymn by Achebe.

Look, our forlorn prayers, our offerings of conciliation lie scattered about your floor where you cast them disdainfully away; and every dawn you pile up your long basket of day with the tools and emblems of death. (Achebe 28)

Achebe echoes the feelings of a fellow Nigerian during anarchy or military rule. Whatever plan was chalked and efforts were taken to form an utopian state, gloom and darkness dominate at the end. Suddenly, dictatorship and tyrannical rule drive the people of Kangan into another cycle of anarchy to another anarchy where the present ruler is killed by a person and declares himself as the ruler only to witness the same nemesis as that of the previous. Author's tone in the hymn sounds to be resonating the distress prevailed during military coup in Nigeria and he was questioning was it the right choice to come to the power by killing people and curbing their civilian rights.

The strange feelings I had been nursing since Thursday after noon now threatened to explode in violent froths of anger as this latest ingredient of insult was dropped with such casualness into the brew. God! Who did this fellow think he was? First he orders me to dinner and rings off before I have had time to express my profound gratitude. Then he doesn't think it is necessary to warn me that I have a forty-mile journey to make for the privilege! What in heaven's name was going on in this country? (Achebe 66)

Here is another voice that bellows the chaos enforced on the Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance. Being the girlfriend of Chris Oriko and a friend of Ikem as well as Sam and being in a high position in the Ministry serving the government, being the only bearer of a first-class honors in English from Queen Mary College, University of London, Beatrice was always considered to be one of the regular invitees of Government goodwill depiction

functions arranged within or outside the presidential palace. Beatrice was the only invitee for this place in the absence of Chris and Ikem. Beatrice was neither informed that she was to travel to Abachi a village, 40 kilometers away from the city, where the meeting was planned nor given a chance to divulge her opinion on it, conveys the kind freedom given to officials of the Government.

In fact the very purpose of inviting Beatrice was to talk to Miss Cranford (Lou) of the American United Press, in an attempt to fabricate things to her that in-house rebellious voice, was not true. Lou was sent on a mission to find out the domestic unrest which was loud through National Gazette and other forms of media over the existing government, which they supposed to know for deciding matters on 'quid pro quo'. Here, the force wielded on an executive of the cabinet against her will and consultation is too obvious to say kind of freedom one enjoys in Sam's ruling.

When Sam came to power after toppling Civilian Government in a Military Coup, seemed reasonable but his meeting with former president Mr. Ngongo, whom Sam considers his inspiration brought his true color out. He stopped believing his own shadow. He was surrounded by 'puppet like Ministers' who were mean and unjust and were described by Ikem as clowns just because they make no sense in their presence and suggestion to the President. Off-late Sam developed mistrust over Chris, and Ikem which was reassured at the function in Abichi. "Aha! This was the man who, as rumor has it, returned from an intensive course in a Latin American army and invented the simplest of tortures for preliminary interrogations (Achebe 97)".

Achebe sketched the characters of Ikem and Chris, who desire a change in the country's administration, but Ikem with Democracy and Chris to certain extent in confusion with stern rule, which he realizes wrong by the end of the novel. Chris ardently feels that the present state of the government (military rule) was the only government that can bring advancement to the country and elevate everybody as a unit than the civilian regime that became corrupt in

past. In chapter six he says, tyranny or bloodshed is agreeable as they bring the change in country, which was considered as a matter of pride for the generations that follow, Chris' opinion on this stand is as follows:

“Nations,” he said, “were fostered as much by structures as by laws and revolutions. These structures where they exist now are the pride of their nations. But everyone forgets that they were not erected by democratically-elected Prime Ministers but very frequently by rather unattractive, bloodthirsty medieval tyrants. The cathedral of Europe, the Taj Mahal of India, the pyramids of Egypt and the stone towers of Zimbabwe were all raised on the backs of serfs, starving peasants and slaves. Our present rulers in Africa are in every sense late flowering medieval monarchs, even the Marxists among them.” (Achebe 67, 68)

This viewpoint thoroughly opposed and differed by Ikem, as he opts democracy right from the beginning and he speaks boldly on the rights of a civil man on their behalf. This heated verbal combat took place between Chris and Ikem in the presence of Beatrice Oka, where Ikem questioned the transparency of money spent on refurbishments and remarked that the purpose is deviated and it is an act of retreat.

From the people and their basic needs of water which is free from Guinea worm, of simple shelter and food. That's what you are retreating from. You retreat up the hill and commune with your cronies and forget the very people who legitimize your authority. (Achebe 67)

Government resorting to corrupt ways and showing no sign of interest in the development of the masses was the cause for the military coup, and again the same practices and mistakes were committed by the new to the utter dismay of people of the Kangan. This showcases the existence of political instability due to monopoly which leads to mayhem.

Achebe's asset was his fund of stories and use of tales and with one such fable author tries to relate the present milieu of commotion to a myth.

Idemili deign to answer him directly. He must go away and await her sign and pleasure. If she finds him unworthy to carry the authority of ozo she simply sends death to smite him and save her sacred hierarchy from contamination and scandal. If, however, she approves of him the only sign she condescends to give- grudgingly and by indirection-is that he will still be about after three years. Such is Idemili's contempt for man's unquenchable thirst to sit in authority on his fellows. (Achebe 95)

The above fable says Idemeli, daughter of God descended to earth to put off growing turbulence and to look after who should have the position of OZO, the ruler of a place. The story says, if the person willing to become OZO should perform two rites and await the consent of the daughter of God, Idemeli. If the anticipant of the power is corrupt or found scandalous in his conduct he would die because it is god's proclamation, executed by daughter of God, Idemili.

Beatrice, the first women character, fully developed by Achebe exemplifies Idemili in the fable through the character of Beatrice. Achebe, reckons the fall of civilian government in a military coup and the constant growth of instability over the present military led government. Both governments were not led by persons of righteousness, which is the reason why they were killed as in the case of the fable.

Hence it is declared that in free and Independent Kangan, there was no sovereignty given to cabinet ministers, officials of the government, common men or even to the print and electronic media, even though it is freed from the foreign ruling. This expresses regular political immaturity, lack of practical tactics to deal with such sorts of problems. It also displays the vulnerability of political and societal structures to withhold any of the internal or external coups.

Teiko, Nii Okain, Lecturer, Methodist University College, Ghana, in his article stated that, these theories of fight and sadistic remove from power of regime are familiar litigious ways of tackling the matter of despotism. They do well in the reproduction of partisanship with its connected evils of communal conflict and futile butchery of guiltless populace. Just the same advocated by Achebe but hoping for the true freedom.

However, the way the novel ended with a christening ceremony of Elewa's newly born daughter, organized by Beatrice and the very title *Anthills of the Savannah* indicate an idea at the nucleus of the novel's message. Anthills endure the famine every year, and when flames brush across the savannah, they withstand and remain on the parched countryside. Therefore, anthills stand for continued existence in the face of thorny state of affairs. They being there imply an unending life force that tolerates in the face of the facts that one more flame is predictable. It is just because of the said details, the anthills are appropriate sign for the durable fortitude of the Nigerians and their ethnicity.

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