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Abstract

Before we assess Achebe's contribution to the development of African literature we must put the record straight and see things in their proper perspective. It is necessary to start by stating categorically that Achebe was not the first to write realistic fiction in Anglophone Africa. It is a well-known fact that Cyprian Ekwensi, the Nigerian writer, published his *People of the City* in 1954, four years before *Things Fall Apart* saw the light of day. In South Africa the first novel in English by a black writer, Sol Plaatje's *Mhudi*, was published in 1930. In Zimbabwe the first novel to be published in the Shona language, Solomon Mutswairo's *Feso*, came out in 1957, one year before *Things Fall Apart*.

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Be that as it may, the name of Chinua Achebe is synonymous with the rise and development of modern African literature because Achebe is a pace-setter. At the time when Africa was awakening from the deep sleep of colonial domination Achebe was one of the first to record and promote the rising consciousness of the African in the process of fighting for nationhood. His first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, and Camara Laye's *The African Child* together heralded the rise of the modern African novel, and *Things Fall Apart* overshadowed any work that was published before it. The two novels, together with Negritude poetry, marked the awakening of nationalist consciousness in Africa and pointed the way for the rest of African writers, particularly novelists. Thus the publication of *Things Fall Apart* was a landmark in the cultural and political development of Africa.

A perceptive analysis of the development of African history and literature will also show that the publication of *A Man of the People* was another turning point. During the struggle for independence the African politician and the African writer joined hands in the campaign against colonialism and cultural imperialism, but in less than a decade of their rule many African leaders proved that they were incapable of providing adequate leadership. Instead, African rule was characterised by neo-colonialism, economic mismanagement, tribalism, corruption and other

social ills. Achebe would summarise the whole problem as a leadership problem.¹ Consequently, while Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, Camara Laye's *The African Child*, Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *The River Between* and Negritude poetry had been a response to Africa's encounter with Europe and the consequent rejection of European cultural and political domination, it was now incumbent upon the African writer to ask questions about the way things were going in independent Africa, and Achebe led the way. *A Man of the People* was the first major novel of disillusionment in Anglophone Africa. Published in 1966, two years before Ayi Kwei Armah's *The Beautiful Ones Are Not Yet Born*, it was the first novel in English to seriously tackle the theme of corruption in high places.

It is my contention in this paper that Achebe was destined to be the doyen of African fiction writers for two principal reasons. The first of these is that he was a talented writer and a genuine artist. There are many who have been given the talent to use words and to tell interesting stories, but the genuine artist strives to go beyond the telling of a good and captivating story and endeavours to communicate something of significance and lasting value; to tell a story which captures the history of a whole generation, of a nation, at the same time as telling the story of particular individuals. The genuine artist causes us to reflect on our own lives, on the lives of our nations and the history of humankind as we read about individual characters in a novel.

In Achebe's authorship character is intricately bound up with history and social circumstance. Okonkwo, Obi and Ezeulu are genuine characters with individual qualities and traits and yet their behaviour is influenced by history and social conditions. In *Odili* and *Chief Nanga* Achebe has created characters with very distinct personal qualities, but their story is also the story of Nigeria soon after independence, and, I dare say, the story of many an African country. The death of Okonkwo is the death of an individual character, but it is also a symbol of the destruction of the social fabric of Igbo society as a result of the onslaught of western cultural, political and economic influences. The same is true of the demise of Ezeulu, the Chief Priest of Ulu. The experiences and predicament of Obi Okonkwo are a mirror of the experiences of any African intellectual who found himself in a responsible position during the transition from colonialism to independence in the 1950s and 1960s. What all this means is that as we follow the progress of Achebe's characters we are engaging in an interpretation and assessment of the progress and failures of African nations.

And yet the success of Achebe's art does not only consist in his creation of characters. His work has other enduring qualities; one of these is his use of language. I have said of *Arrow of God* that 'Achebe writes in Standard English, but by no means in conventional English. He di-

verges into different directions depending on the interlocutor, the historical and social context and on the interlocutor's age, sex, education and so on.² Consequently, Achebe uses language that is appropriate to character and circumstance. This does not happen by accident. It is in line with what Achebe says in the essay 'The African Writer and the English Language' in which he declares:

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience.³

Character portrayal and the use of language alone do not fully account for the success of Achebe's art. There is, in addition, the writer's skill in telling the story, his narrative technique. In his first four novels our author's plots are basically linear and the story is told in chronological order (there is a slight variation in *No Longer At Ease*).

An aspect of narrative structure is point of view. In the first three novels Achebe adopts the omniscient narrator point of view. However, in *A Man of the People* he adopts a different technique. Here the author employs the first-person narrative, with the story told by the protagonist who is Odili. The first-person narrator technique enables the writer to project Odili, not only as a commentator on what goes on in the novel, but as a spokesperson from whom the author can distance himself. Achebe masters both techniques; relying on the omniscient narrator technique in *Things Fall Apart*, he has created a story full of power and beauty, and in *A Man of the People* the author exploits the first-person narrator technique to create an ironic situation in which the protagonist is both the author's spokesperson and one of the prime objects of criticism. Consequently *A Man of the People* is a humorous novel which invites the reader to at once condemn and laugh at human foibles and misdemeanours.

Successful as they are in character portrayal, the use of language and narrative technique, Achebe's novels would not be as great as they are if the author did not have a social vision and a clearly articulated philosophy of art. This is the second of Achebe's qualities referred to above.

One of the hallmarks of Achebe as a creative artist is that he is a committed writer who firmly believes that the writer has a mission in society. Way back in 1964 he had this to say: 'The worst thing that can happen to any people is the loss of their dignity and self respect. The writer's duty is to help them regain it by showing them in human terms what happened to them, what they lost.'⁴ Here Achebe was

referring to what he called 'the fundamental theme' that had to be disposed of first, namely, 'that African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans'.⁵ To perform this task, Achebe went on to say, and to explore the human condition in depth, the writer had to have a proper sense of history.

What Achebe called 'a proper sense of history' explains two fundamental features of his art. The first is that reading Achebe's novels is like reading about the history of Africa from pre-colonial times through colonialism and the early days of independence to the present, a fact which ties up with what I said earlier about Achebe's characters who have distinctive traits and at the same time epitomise the experiences of African nations and peoples. Second, and this is very important, Achebe's works are characterised by realism.

To have a clear understanding and appreciation of the aspect of realism we must distinguish between authorial ideology and aesthetic ideology. Authorial ideology is the social vision of the writer which can be defined in terms of whether he or she is a nationalist, a liberal democrat, a radical, a revolutionary and so on. Judging from what Achebe says about 'the fundamental theme' and going by his pronouncements in other essays such as 'The Novelist as Teacher' in which he sees himself espousing a revolution consisting in helping his society 'regain belief in itself and put away years of denigration and self-abasement',⁶ it becomes clear that from the point of view of authorial ideology Achebe is a nationalist or liberal democrat. As a nationalist writing during the period of agitation against colonial domination he might have been tempted to glorify African culture and the African past. But that is not Achebe's way of doing things. From the point of view of aesthetic ideology, from the standpoint of his theory of artistic representation, our author is a realist. This means, among other things, that he does not give us a false or biased view of the historical epoch he sets out to portray. In his 'old world' novels, he makes use of a wide variety of characters to represent different social groups and points of view. His characters are typical and the circumstances under which they operate are natural and convincing. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* he gives us a truthful and balanced picture of Igbo society and does not gloss over its weaknesses despite his declared intention to dispose of 'the fundamental theme'. This is not just a matter of talent – it is a result of the author's reflections on the functions of the writer in society and on the problem of the mode of artistic representation in literary creativity. In other words, it is an expression of the author's social vision and philosophy of art. In 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation' Achebe has this to say about re-creating the past:

This is where the writer's integrity comes in. Will he be strong enough to overcome the temptation to select only those facts which flatter him? If he succumbs he will have branded himself as an untrustworthy witness. But it is not only his personal integrity as an artist which is involved. The credibility of the world he is attempting to re-create will be called to question and he will defeat his own purpose if he is suspected of glossing over inconvenient facts. We cannot pretend that our past was one long, technicolour idyll. We have to admit that like other people's pasts ours had its good as well as its bad sides.⁷

What Achebe is alluding to here is that in literary creativity there is often a contradiction between authorial and aesthetic ideology, between the author's political and social views on the one hand, and the demands of art on the other. The writer has to be careful not to let the imperatives of political ideology triumph over artistic creativity. From what I have said it is clear that Achebe's art is a model of the triumph of realism over the claims of nationalism. This is why I say *Things Fall Apart* is a greater work of art than *The African Child*. In the latter book Camara Laye gets carried away by the imperatives of nationalism and so nationalism tends to triumph over realism. As Achebe puts it, *The African Child* is 'a little too sweet' because the author has not realised that 'any serious African writer who wants to plead the cause of the past must not only be God's advocate, he must also do duty for the devil'.⁸ This brings us to Achebe's latest novel, which is the subject of the rest of this paper.

First published in 1987 by William Heinemann in Britain and in 1988 by Anchor Press in New York, *Anthills of the Savannah* saw the light of day thirty years after the publication of *Things Fall Apart* and just over twenty years after its immediate predecessor, *A Man of the People*. Before the publication of his latest novel, many commentators thought that our author had dried up. Then, when the world least expected it, *Anthills of the Savannah* appeared on the world's literary scene.

When I learned about the publication of the book, a series of questions immediately presented themselves to my mind: Does Achebe have anything new to say? Does the new novel indicate a development in social vision and artistic creativity? Is Achebe capable of maintaining the artistic excellence of his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*? Is the publication of this new novel another landmark in the development of African literature? What, in short, is the place and significance of *Anthills of the Savannah* relative to Achebe's own works and in relation to African history and the development of African literature?

Elsewhere I have argued that Ngugi wa Thiong'o's ideological perspective has developed from nationalist politics to revolutionary politics,

from critical realism to socialist art.⁹ The suggestion here is that a writer who is continually coming to grips with the problems of society and art is likely to develop to higher levels of social consciousness and, as a consequence, to strive for new forms of artistic representation, forms which match his or her quest for democracy and social transformation. The burden of this paper is to show that a sensitive and perceptive reading of *Anthills of the Savannah* will reveal that Achebe has risen to new heights in both artistic excellence and social vision. Let us briefly examine the various features of his art outlined in the previous section, starting with the use of language.

When writers make their debut with a classic of the quality of *Things Fall Apart* it is often not easy for them to match that first performance in later works. In my own estimation *Things Fall Apart* stands head and shoulders above the other three novels. With regard to the use of the language it may be argued that although he over-played the importance of proverbs in *Arrow of God*, his skill in that particular aspect has become so perfect that the language of the third novel is superior to that of any of the other novels, *Things Fall Apart* included. But when we read *Anthills of the Savannah* we are struck by a new and refreshing quality in the use of language, a quality that is perhaps discernible in *No Longer At Ease* and *A Man of the People*, but not in the same degree of excellence. Achebe's basic philosophy regarding the use of the English language by the African writer has not changed. There is, for instance, a clear distinction between the language of relatively uneducated people like Agnes, Beatrice's housemaid, and Elewa, Ikem Osodi's girlfriend. These consistently speak Pidgin, unlike Beatrice, Chris, Ikem and His Excellency, all of whom belong to the educated elite and would normally use standard English. It is also clear that the bearded old man who is one of the leaders of the Abazon delegation that meets Ikem at Harmony Hotel in Chapter 9 is reminiscent of the likes of Ezeulu, those who represent traditional wisdom and are blessed with the gift of eloquence. His English is meant to be Achebe's rendering of the Igbo he would have spoken. This is all familiar to Achebe's readers, but there are some new elements now. Achebe is such a master of the English language that he is able to skilfully combine what sounds like conventional English spoken and written by linguistically talented mother tongue speakers with a local educated variety of the language and the idiom of non-English speaking characters, to produce a style which is almost classical but almost with an underlying informal touch that saves it from being stilted. Consider, for example, this passage from the first chapter of the novel:

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 together and was in the very act of lifting the file-cover over them and dragging them into his hole after him when his entire body suddenly went rigid. Stronger alarms from deeper recesses of instinct may have alerted him to the similarity between his impending act and a slamming of the door in the face of His Excellency. A fantastic thing happened then. He drops the file-cover in such panic that everyone now turns to him and sees him perform the strangest act of all: the scattering again of his Council Papers in panic atonement and restitution for the sacrilege he has come so close to committing. Inadvertently. Then he glances round the table until his eyes meet His Excellency's and fall dead on the mahogany.¹⁰

The following passage from Chapter 7 is also worthy of the reader's attention:

I was determined from the very beginning to put my career first and, if need be, last. That every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit I had completely rejected before I knew there was anything like Women's Lib. You often hear people say: But that's something you picked up in England. Absolute rubbish! There was enough male chauvinism in my father's house to last me seven reincarnations! (p. 88)

The first passage represents Chris Oriko's language and the second Beatrice's. The features which are clearly noticeable in the two passages are the conversational style, the natural flow of the language and how easily readable the extracts are. It is also worth noting that in these and many other passages Achebe is able to maintain a fine balance between informality and formality. This is partly because he employs the first-person narrator point of view. At the same time he does not lose the opportunity to exploit the use of local idioms which even highly educated people like Professor Reginald Okong are wont to use in appropriate situations. In the following passage Professor Okong is attempting to curry favour with His Excellency the President:

'But Your Excellency, you are too generous. Too generous by half! Why does every bad thing in this country start in Abazon Province? The Rebellion was there . . . If you ask me, your Excellency, God does not sleep. How do we know that that drought they are suffering over there may not be God's judgement for all the troubles they have caused in this country. And now they have the audacity to write Your Excellency to visit their Province and before you can even reply to their invitation they *carry their nonsense come your house*. I think Your Excellency that you are being too generous. Too generous by half, I am sorry to say.' (p. 18)

It is amazing how Achebe manages to combine a wide variety of stylistic features and to slide into different moods with great ease. The style is on the whole lighthearted. The novel deals with very serious matters but the tenor of discourse is relaxed and sufficiently informal to allow the reader to reflect and digest the ideas without being overburdened by a heavy style. This is also true of *A Man of the People*, but I believe that it is more difficult to achieve in *Anthills* because whereas in the former novel the principal characters, Odili and Chief Nanga, are not portrayed as serious-minded characters, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, all the major characters are addressing what they believe to be grave matters but in a manner which is never so serious as to bring about a feeling of depression in the mind of the reader. On the contrary there is even irresistible humour in many a passage when Professor Okong refers to the overthrow of the civilian regime as 'a historic fall from grace to the grass' (p. 12) and in passages depicting His Excellency the President's wit and wry humour.

In *Anthills of the Savannah* the use of language is intricately bound up with the author's narrative technique. As already explained Achebe's plots in the first novels are basically linear and he adopts the omniscient point of view in all the novels except *A Man of the People* in which he experiments with the first-person narrator technique. *Anthills* has a far more complex plot than any of its predecessors. This is partly a result of the fact that the author makes a complicated use of the first-person narrative and combines it with the omniscient narrator technique. The story is told from the point of view of three characters - Chris Oriko, the Commissioner for Information in the Republic of Kangan; Ikem Osodi, editor of the *National Gazette*; and Beatrice Okoh, Chris's girlfriend and a Senior Secretary in the Ministry of Finance. In addition to these three narrators there is the omniscient narrator who takes over from each one of them at a convenient point. For example, the events that take place in Chapter 1 are narrated by Chris Oriko who, like Beatrice, puts his observations in writing. But in Chapter 2 the omniscient narrator takes over. In Chapter 4 we have the first-person narrator point of view, Ikem Osodi being the storyteller, and in Chapter 5 the omniscient narrator takes over again, and this goes on and on. An important consequence of the technique is that the author is able to explore in depth a wide variety of issues from different angles. Instead of seeing the events through the eyes of one storyteller as in *A Man of the People*, we are presented with the versions of at least four major narrators. Take the character of His Excellency the President, for example. We get to know him from what Chris says about him, from what Ikem says, from Beatrice's internal monologues as well as her conversations with Chris, and also from the events described by the

omniscient narrator. As a result His Excellency emerges as a rounded character who does not only have distinctive features and qualities, but also gives us a genuine insight into the behaviour and ideology of some African Heads of State and into their relations with their ministers and other senior government officials. Through the omniscient narrator we get an insight into the President's capacity to keep his ministers on their toes by playing them off against one another, and through Beatrice's narrative we begin to see a sharp contrast between his ability to control his own ministers and the ease with which Westerners, even mere journalists, can dominate his thinking and behaviour, as in the case of Lou Cranford, the American journalist we meet in Chapter 6. The upshot of this multiple narrator technique is that Achebe creates four main characters each of whom gives us a view of the society and political set-up depicted in the novel.

As if the multiple narrator technique is not sufficiently complicated in itself, Achebe adds to the complexity of the plot by making generous use of the flashback and other modes of narration. For example, we get to know about the past lives of His Excellency and of other characters through the recollections of Chris and Beatrice. For instance, we meet His Excellency exercising his power as Head of State at the beginning of Chapter 1 and only at the end of the same chapter does Chris explain how Sam came to be President and how his education and military training prepared him for the position. What is more, we only get a clear account of the relationship between Sam, Chris and Ikem at the end of Chapter 5.

There are other features which add to the complexity of the narrative structure of *Anthills of the Savannah*. One of these is the use of symbolism in conjunction with myth and allusion. A supreme example of this feature is Ikem's 'Hymn to the Sun' (pp. 30-33) which foreshadows the disaster that follows in the novel and is probably a comment on the self-destructive tactics of His Excellency who, in an attempt to preserve his own power, resorts to destroying his former friends and is himself destroyed in the process. There is also the reference to David Diop's poem, 'Africa', whose last lines encapsulate one of Achebe's suggestions about the way forward for Africa – that what is at issue, is not so much a political system, as the patience to develop, through experience and over a long period of time, a viable political and economic system (see pp. 23-128). Finally, there is the naming ceremony for Elewa's daughter which symbolises a new major development – that the world of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* has now gone and has been replaced by new social values in that, contrary to custom, the naming has been done collectively by young people and the old man from the village who was supposed to perform the task realises that social values

have changed and so accepts and blesses what the young people have done (see ch. 18).

What I have outlined so far is sufficient evidence of new developments that have taken place in Achebe as an artist. But the question still remains: Are there any new changes in social consciousness and artistic vision? Has there been a significant development in authorial ideology and aesthetic ideology? From the point of view of dialectical criticism it is pertinent to ask whether Achebe has developed from a basically nationalist consciousness or liberal democracy to socialist or revolutionary consciousness, and from critical realism, the aesthetic ideology that characterises his first four novels, to socialist realism. My point of departure is that unlike Ngugi wa Thiong'o Achebe has not become a Marxist. Consequently, the development that has taken place between the publication of *Things Fall Apart* and the writing of *Anthills of the Savannah* is not comparable to the transformation that took place between the publication of *The River Between* and the writing of *Petals of Blood*.

For one thing, like many other African writers, Achebe's analysis of African society is presented from the point of view of one class – the *petit bourgeoisie*, or, to be more precise, the intelligentsia. All his major characters – Chris, Ikem, Beatrice and Sam (Him Excellency) are members of the educated elite class. The intelligentsia occupies the centre of the stage in Achebe's world while the other classes are either pushed to the periphery or relegated to oblivion. The two major classes of oppressed and deprived people, the peasants and the workers, are given a place in the world of *Anthills*, but they are given minor roles to play in the drama of that world. The peasantry is represented by the delegation from Abazon and by Elewa's mother and uncle who visit Bassa for the naming ceremony. The working class is represented by the taxi-drivers who form an alliance with Ikem. These are minor characters and our author does not give us sufficient insight into their lives and into their response to the events and problems that plague the Republic of Kangan. Indeed the peasants of Abazon Province come to Bassa in an effort to reach an accommodation with 'the big Chief' with a view to persuading the Government to continue with the work on bore-holes which was stopped because of the people of Abazon's refusal to support His Excellency's claim to life presidency, and indeed Chris Oriko ultimately flees to drought-stricken Abazon and dies there in the company of Emmanuel Obete, the President of the Students' Union, and Braimoh, one of the taxi-drivers; but we as readers do not have first-hand information about the living conditions, life style and predicament of the inhabitants of rural Abazon. As for the most privileged class, the class of rich people who own the means of production, our

only encounter with it is through a brief reference to Alhaji Abdul Mahmoud, Chairman of the Kangan/American Chamber of Commerce who wallows in the filth of wealth and corruption (p. 117).

Some will no doubt accuse me of telling Achebe to write a novel he did not set out to write. The accusation may well be justified but I submit that the point I am making is a valid one – that Achebe gives us a somewhat partial view of the social fabric of the Republic of Kangan because the story is presented from the point of view of one class, the class to which the author belongs, namely, the *petit bourgeoisie* and, in particular, the political and intellectual elite. In *Petals of Blood* Ngugi goes beyond the confines of his own class and portrays in some depth the activities of workers and peasants. Dialectical criticism maintains that the vision of a non-Marxist writer like Achebe is constrained by the limitations of the writer's 'false consciousness' and so he or she will display a limited world view with regard to the place of various classes in society. Consequently what such a writer presents is a partial view of the epoch he or she has chosen to write about.

In spite of the limitations of authorial ideology referred to above, I want to argue in the remaining part of this paper that *Anthills of the Savannah* demonstrates some major developments in Achebe's political philosophy and artistic vision. I wish to start by quoting Georg Lukacs who has said, 'The difference between the Marxist and the non- or pre-Marxist revolutionary democrat consists in the fact that the latter is not conscious of the social and epistemological connections which underlie the unity of his theory and practice and that he fulfils this unity generally on the basis of a "false consciousness", often full of illusions.' Lukacs then goes on to make a very important observation which clarifies what sometimes appears to be a contradiction between a writer's authorial ideology and his or her aesthetic ideology, between the writer's professed political belief and the ideology projected in his or her writings. I refer here to instances where a writer who is not a revolutionary or radical projects a revolutionary or radical world view in his or her works. One has in mind writers like Balzac and Tolstoy who were royalist in political inclination but wrote novels that projected the rebellious spirit of the peasantry. Says Lukacs, 'But the history of literature proves that if a writer is deeply rooted in popular life, if his writing stems from this intimacy with the most important questions of popular life, he can, even with a "false consciousness", plumb the real depths of historical truth.'¹¹

One of the major indications of Achebe's development in social consciousness is his portrayal of women. In the earlier novels women are given minor roles and all the major parts are taken by male characters. There is one significant exception to this and that is Clara in *No Longer*

At Ease, but while she is a fully developed character, she finds herself acting in a world dominated by men, and while Obi genuinely loves her, he tends to patronise her and is portrayed as her intellectual superior. Beatrice, on the other hand, is neither intellectually inferior to Chris nor dominated and patronised by him. Their relationship is a relationship of equals who have a natural attraction for each other. While she rejects the Western concept of Women's Lib, she is certainly of the view that woman is equal to man and a woman can live a complete life without a man. It is indeed significant that Beatrice is the only government official who is brave enough to tell His Excellency off. Disgusted by the excessive deference His Excellency shows to Lou, a mere journalist, because she is an American, Beatrice is bold enough to accost the Head of State who normally reduces his ministers to the status of mere boys: "If I went to America today, to Washington DC, would I, could I, walk into a White House private dinner and take the American President hostage. And his Defence Chief and his Director of CIA?" (p. 81).

It is also significant that Beatrice is closely connected with Ikem's daughter, who symbolises hope for a better future, and worthy of note that Ikem's child is a girl. It is Beatrice who names the child and the symbolic significance of the child is captured in the name Beatrice chooses for her: 'We have our own version of hope that springs eternal. We shall call this child AMAECHINA: *May-the-path-never-close*. Ama for short' (p. 222). So the struggle for justice and democracy continues and the seed of revolution Ikem Osodi has planted shall grow again patiently and obstinately until its fruit gradually acquires the bitter taste of liberty, as David Diop says in his great poem which is quoted as an epigraph at the beginning of Chapter 10.

But what is this seed that Ikem has planted? It is my contention that if there is any character whose ideas and views are most closely related to Achebe's views about art and politics, it is Ikem Osodi. Through the opinions of Ikem and other characters, Achebe persuades the reader to reflect on a number of topical issues – the place of women in society, issues relating to class struggle and theories of revolution, the African predicament, as well as issues relating to literary theory and the role of the writer in society. As a novelist and a journalist and also as one who is not directly part of His Excellency's government machinery, Ikem appears to be the most appropriate character to raise some of these questions and to reflect on them.

With regard to the question of women, his views are deeply influenced by his interaction with Beatrice who has definite ideas about the place of women in society. Among other things, Beatrice holds the view that 'giving women today the same role which traditional society gave

them of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough' (p. 91), and she sees this as a weakness in Ikem's original political position, as a fact which blurs his vision as a writer. It is her discussions with him on questions such as these that lead him to formulate his new theory on women and other oppressed social groups. His reflections on the problem of women result in the formulation of a radical theory of social class. 'The women . . . are the biggest single group of oppressed people in the world,' says Ikem, . . . but they are not the only such group. There are others - rural peasants in every land, the urban poor in industrialised countries, Black people everywhere, including their own continent, ethnic and religious minorities and castes in all countries (p. 98). Using Ikem as a mouthpiece, Achebe comments on the theory of class and class struggle and calls to question some of the fundamental tenets of historical Marxism, including the idea of a millennium in which there is no oppression of one social group by another after the establishment of communism. Ikem believes that the orthodox Marxist position proposes a simplistic remedy to the problem of oppression. For his part, he does not believe that once a socialist and communist revolution has taken place, all the social problems of society are bound to disappear:

'The sweeping, majestic visions of people rising victorious like a tidal wave against their oppressors and transforming their world with theories and slogans into a new heaven and a new earth of brotherhood, justice and freedom are at best grand illusions. The rising, conquering tide, yes; but the millennium afterwards, no! New oppressors will have been readying themselves secretly in the undertow long before the tidal wave got really going.' (p. 99)

From these universal issues let us turn to some of Ikem's reflections on the African predicament. In *A Man of the People* Achebe exposes the corrupting power of privilege and position. In *A Man of the People* we see how people who have been given positions of authority in society are tempted to abuse those positions and indulge in self-aggrandisement and personal pleasure at the expense of the majority. In *Anthills of the Savannah* we are made to reflect more deeply on the problem. There is indeed massive corruption; there is subservience to foreign manipulation, which is despicable, there are the problems of capitalism; but that is not all. There is a deeper problem, as Ikem begins to realise: 'The prime failure of this government began also to take on a clearer meaning for him. . . . It is the failure of our rulers to re-establish vital inner links with the poor and dispossessed of this country, with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation's being' (p. 141). The leadership does not have the interests of the people at heart and has lost contact with the people. In this connection it is pertinent to

note that if there is any Nigerian politician Achebe holds in high esteem, it is the late Mallam Aminu Kano. And why does he extoll Aminu Kano? The answer is given in *The Trouble with Nigeria*: Aminu Kano gave the example of 'a selfless commitment to the common people of our land whom we daily deprive and dispossess and whose plight we treat so callously and frivolously'.¹²

Ikem Osodi looks at all the issues referred to above and others in relation to his function as a writer. In the course of articulating his political philosophy he is in the same breath propounding a theory of artistic creativity. His rejection of aspects of the orthodoxy of historical Marxism is closely linked with his views on the relationship between art and any belief. Referring to Graham Greene, a staunch Roman Catholic who does not idealise Catholic priests in his novels, Ikem asks: "Why then does he write so compulsively about bad, doubtful and doubting priests?" And the answer he gives is, "Because a genuine artist, no matter what he says he believes, must feel in his blood the ultimate enmity between art and orthodoxy" (p. 100). This harks back to what we said about realism: that through its own dynamics it forces the writer to depict the world as it is rather than as he or she would like it to be. Ikem in fact refers to this in his discussion with Beatrice in Chapter 7. The writer must not seek to constrain his or her characters but must let them go ahead and say or do things which make the creator uncomfortable. "It simply dawned on me two mornings ago that a novelist must listen to his characters who after all are created to wear the shoe and point the writer where it pinches" (pp. 96-97).

In his lecture to university students in Chapter 13 Ikem addresses the all-important question of the function of the writer. The writer does not provide solutions to problems, he argues; a writer does not give answers, but asks questions. Writers do not give prescriptions, they give headaches. Writers are therefore gadflies that prick our consciences. The most important function of the writer is to induce people to reflect upon the condition of their lives, to raise their consciousness so that they can begin to ask why things are as they are, why things are going wrong:

No I cannot give you the answer you are clamouring for. Go home and think! I cannot decree your pet, text-book revolution. I want instead to excite general enlightenment by forcing all the people to examine the condition of their lives because, as the saying goes, the unexamined life is not worth living. . . . As a writer I aspire only to widen the scope of that self-examination. (p. 158)

What conclusions can we draw about Achebe's development as an artist since the publication of the first four novels, and what is the significance of *Anthills of the Savannah*? It should be clear from what has been said in the main body of this essay that a Marxist interpretation of the novel will see some weaknesses in Achebe's social analysis, and consequently in his mode of representation. But there is no doubt that in *Anthills of the Savannah* our author has produced a novel whose complexity in narrative structure is second to none, a novel which raises questions about, and probes profoundly into a wide variety of, fundamental issues. For instance Ikem's point about all certitude being suspect (p. 99) and his scepticism about a millennium has been vindicated before our very eyes in this decade. In Eastern Europe and Asia socialist countries have come to the realisation that the mere adoption of socialism as a political ideology is not in itself a panacea that presents ready solutions to all problems of social and economic development. After going through a fervent cultural revolution China abandoned the approach in 1978 and adopted an open-door policy and a form of socialism that is suited to Chinese conditions. In the Soviet Union, Gorbachev has followed suit with his *perestroika*, while one of the former leaders of the German Democratic Republic, Mr Krenz, recently called for a redefinition of socialism. This is not to say that there is necessarily something inherently wrong with socialism, but simply to emphasise the point Achebe makes that simplistic remedies like the dictatorship of the proletariat are likely to fail.

Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* ends with a wonderful vision of workers and peasants leading the struggle to bring about an end to exploitation and class struggle:

From Koitalel through Kang'ethe to Kimathi it has been the peasants, aided by the workers, small traders and small landowners, who had mapped out the path. Tomorrow it would be the workers and the peasants leading the struggle and seizing power to overturn the system and all its prying bloodthirsty gods and gnomonic angels, bringing to an end the reign of the few over the many and the era of drinking blood and feasting on human flesh. Then, only then, would the kingdom of man and woman really begin, they joining and loving in creative labour...¹³

This is the kind of enthusiasm about which Achebe is saying: 'Wait a minute. Is it really going to be as simple as all that? Is there no likelihood of new oppressors emerging from among the victors?' Commenting on this very passage in *Art and Ideology in the African Novel* I have had occasion to make the point that 'socialism is an ideal to fight for since its aim is to end the exploitation of man by man, to reduce inequality and to improve the quality of life for everyone, but it is

important to admit that contradictions can never be completely wiped out'.¹⁴

Part of the greatness of *Anthills of the Savannah* lies in the fact that it does not only raise such questions. It compels the reader to reflect upon them, and there is no greater achievement writers can hope for than to be able to persuade their readers to reflect on the issues raised in their works. *Anthills of the Savannah* challenges the reader to address fundamental questions about society and art and to engage in the process of self-examination. In comparison with Achebe's other works, the latest novel is at least as great as *Things Fall Apart* and is a far more complex novel. In the context of African literature I rank it with some of the finest works to have come out of the continent, works like *Petals of Blood*, *God's Bits of Wood* and *In the Fog of the Season's End*. Furthermore, I believe *Anthills of the Savannah* is another landmark in the development of African literature for coming a decade after the revolutionary fervour of works like *Two Thousand Seasons* and *Petals of Blood* it re-examines, in a particularly incisive and pointed manner, fundamental issues relating to political leadership, the place of women in society, the role of the artist and the whole question of revolution and social change. We may disagree with his analysis of some of these issues but we are bound to concede that he succeeds in making us re-examine our assumptions. For this reason we can safely claim that with the publication of *Anthills of the Savannah* Achebe has truly become the great eagle that soars to the heights of committed literary artistry to perch on the giant iroko so that birds of weaker feathers look up in great amazement and dare not scale the mountain.

NOTES

1. See Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble With Nigeria* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1984; reprinted 1987), p. 1.
2. Emmanuel Ngara, *Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel: A Study of the Language, Art and Content of African Fiction* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1982), p. 59.
3. See Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975), p. 61.
4. Chinua Achebe, 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation', in G.D. Killam, ed., *African Writers on African Writing* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1973; reprinted 1978), p. 8.
5. Achebe, in G.D. Killam, op. cit., p. 8.
6. Achebe, 'The Novelist as Teacher', in G.D. Killam, op. cit., p. 3.
7. Achebe, 'The Role of the Writer in a New Nation', in G.D. Killam, op. cit., p. 9.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 9.

9. See Emmanuel Ngara, *Art and Ideology in the African Novel: A Study of the Influence of Marxism on African Writing* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1985), pp. 59ff.
10. Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (London: Heinemann, African Writers Series, 1988), p. 3. All further references are to this edition and are included in the text.
11. Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (Harmondsworth: Penguin (Pelican Books), 1981), pp. 331-332.
12. See Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble With Nigeria*, p. 62.
13. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Petals of Blood* (London: Heinemann Educational Books, African Writers Series), p. 344.
14. See Ngara, *Art and Ideology in the African Novel*, p. 117.