

Full Length Research

Women as Vanguarders in the 21ST Century Politics: A Study of Chinua Achebe's Texts.

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The nation's political terrain has been dominated by male political leaders who seem to be incapable of understanding the needed demands of 21st century politics that deals with complex issues of governance by establishing dialogue with the citizens. These lapses leave an insidious air that is filled by agitations, threats, political victimization, and often murder. Part of the problem inherent in this political situation is that the followers, except a few, tend to be patronizing, cynical and passive on issues concerning them, thereby aiding and abetting corrupt practices. Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987) and *A Man of the People* (1966) present the trend of corruption scandals that reveal the old way of doing politics. Using the framework of feminist political philosophy that advances the new ideals and reconstruction of political institutions, this paper undertakes a literary analysis of the roles of the female characters, Beatrice and Eunice in leading the course of change in the fictional narratives. Hence Beatrice and Eunice are vanguards of the 21st century political participation. It is not however the change of gender roles or stereotypes instead, it is the leading role in championing the course of collective movement in political participation.

Keywords: Feminist Philosophy, Governance, Politics, Political Participation, Vanguarders.

INTRODUCTION

Trust in politics is declining across large parts of the democratic world. People seem to have lost faith in the male politicians who dominate the political space but tend not to deliver on the democratic dividends nor chart the course of good governance for common good. They instead seem to have been immersed in corruption and bad leadership to the detriment of the masses. The key

players are found wanting, constituting a big threat to the peace of the citizens. The followers too, seem also to be patronizing, cynical and passive about events concerning them. Prereira (2018) observes that "there are corruption scandals that reveal the old way of doing politics favouring certain groups in exchange for extremely high payments, strengthening the notion that

democracy is a farce, by a few for a few. From the pessimistic perspective, it is very easy to fall into despair and hopelessness". Those favoured in this situation have been mainly the males dominating political powers. However, all hope may not be lost as it seems because the women actors have tasked themselves to take the lead to an innovative political action.

Thus, 21st century politics presents feminist political philosophy, an evolving field of thought, as a shift in the science of political power holding that has much to offer mainstream politics. According to McAfee (2009) in *Feminist Political Philosophy*:

Is a branch of both feminist philosophy and political philosophy. As a branch of feminist philosophy... it serves as a way of opening up or looking at the political world as it is usually understood and uncovering ways in which women and their current and historical concerns are poorly depicted, represented, and addressed. As a branch of political philosophy, feminist political philosophy serves as a field for developing new ideals, practices, and justifications for how political institutions and practices should be organized and reconstructed' (Standford Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

These two branches of philosophies give rise to new political paradigm that see people coming together to divulge power from the state that has always exerted power on the public. Throwing more light on the concept, Ojong, Etta, & Asukwo (2014) believe that:

...feminist political philosophy focuses most directly on understanding the ways in which power emerges and is used or misused in public life... Feminist political philosophy also addresses and engages a myriad of issues concerning women's experiences and prospects of political beings. This is to say according to Christine Stefana that women as subject of power, come in many forms and permutations, they may be victims of power, wielders of power, transmitters of power, effects of power and/or inventive shapes of power. (P 172).

Women are projected as the tools for the realization of this collective political mandate for the people. Hence, women are in the forefront of the crusade to bridge the gap in political participation and power sharing. Writing about "What Politics will Look Like in the 21st Century" Pedreira (2018), states that "we see a new state emerging, more permeable to citizenship, and a new citizenship that is co-responsible for the success and mistakes made by the state. That means that citizens and governments are not only part of the problem but part of the solution". This portends that the 21st century has political innovations, solutions and approaches that are all encompassing. The female folks have been identified as advancing in the political sphere

as vanguards in mobilizing collective participation towards a better citizen-centered governance.

The narratives in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* (1988) and *A Man of the People* (1966) present these scenarios of bad leadership, corruption, leaders' insensitivity to the plight of the followers, leaving the people in a dismal hopelessness. Scholars have also drawn attention to the semblance of political malfunctioning in the narratives of both texts showing also similar territory of politics in post colonial Africa whereby *A Man of the People* saw events leading up to a coup and *Anthills of the Savannah* is a post-coup narrative. Thus, Jago (2007) observes that 'A Man of the People was a scandal from the outset. With its scathing appraisal of Nigerian public life, and apparent call for a military takeover, the text became notorious in January 1966 for predicting the army coup which took place only hours after the novel's launch' (117). This violent action of a section of the army officers in a coup marked the beginning of a major power struggle in the nation leading to the Biafra war.

However the unfortunate dimension to the issue of power is the role of the followers who majorly act as sycophants. Hence, expressing his concern about this fact, Ezenwa –Ohaeto (1991) in Ehling (Ed) in the essay, 'Patriots and Parasites: The Metaphor of Power in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*' portends that 'the sacrosanct nature of this power depends on the willingness of the followers to flatter the ruler' (25). The followers thereby aid and abet misuse of political powers as seen in their passiveness and inability to challenge the powers that be such that even the ruling class is compromised. The Cabinet is at the whims of the dictator and have lost their voices. This scenario is similarly expressed by Etim in Emenyeonu (2004) *A Man of the People*: 'the mass of the people is portrayed essentially as illiterate, cynical, gullible, docile, sycophantic, fearful of change and repeat performance. They encourage corruption and cannot do anything to bring the politicians into judgement, rather, they are resigned" (296). Hence the passiveness of the followers is instrumental to the collapse of their society. Corruption is celebrated by the society by celebrating corrupt leaders and denigrating good and uncorrupt leaders who do not dole out money. The gullibility of the people is such that wealth or money is the yardstick for according respect and honour to people.

Scholars have analyzed the politics and political landscape in the novels. A lot of discussions have equally been done on Achebe's women. In his article 'Needs that Throbs at the Heart: Solidarity in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*' Akwanya (2013) makes a literary examination of the novel by analyzing the metaphors of the work in such a way that its form as a text, and a woven pattern is apparent' (496). Akpome (2014), in 'Dispersal of Narrative Point of View in Chinua

Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* exhibits important shifts in the author's thematization of socio-political issues in post-independence African nation-states. The essay also gestures towards the way in which the novel's peculiar narrative organization combines with emplotment to produce a unified whole, especially with respect to the thematization of post-independence nationalism in Nigeria and, more widely, in Africa" (19). Similarly, a thematic review of power in different dimensions in Achebe's novels in Ezenwa Ohaeto (1991), 'Patriots and Parasites: The Metaphor of Power in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*' reckons that:

His novels have shown the issue of power at both the communal and individualistic levels. In Things Fall Apart he shows the limits of mundane power as it concerns the protagonist within the ambits of cultural power; in Arrow of God it is the exploration of divine power, in No Longer at Ease it is the analysis of intellectual power; while A Man of the People examines political power and its consequences.....Anthills of the Savannah explores the consequences of that coup. (24).

The essay further illustrates the need to control power with moral values. Power has been a recurrent effect in the texts of Achebe, going through styles and modifications from the communal to political.

However, while some scholars argue then that Achebe presents women as the solution to Nigeria's leadership problem, others contend that Achebe is not presenting Beatrice in *Anthills of the Savannah* as the solution, but that he is instead offering a solution by developing her character to create a space for the voices and perspectives of all citizens, regardless of gender and class. Following this thought, Singler (2018), in 'Goddess of the Savannah: Beatrice as Achebe's Sensible Solution' presents Julie Agbasiere's claims that though Achebe's previous novels have presented masculine dominate societies, these societies still provide a place for women. She points out that in *Anthills of the Savannah*, the woman is dignified and free to live her life the way she wants . . . the more educated she is, the more her prestige rises, and the more she is a good candidate for the governance of the community' (2). In her assessment of issues, Nwagbara (2010), in 'Sexist Matters: Power Play and Gendered Space in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*' discussed the text as 'a piece of fiction centered on power play in the gendered postcolonial Nigeria, where women have been kept at the zero level for a long time. He concludes that, "to move Nigeria forward, cultural materialist approach is crucial, as it will help to illuminate our vision and goal towards re-writing the de-historicised account of the oppressed women, particularly in the cultural and socio-economic spheres". Thus advancing female role has taken an impressive direction in literary discussion. This

paper uses the standpoint of feminist political philosophy to project further the deterministic poise of the women in participating in the new political space whereby, they assume for themselves without any consultation powers to bridge the already existing gap created by gender roles. More specifically, it affirms Beatrice's and Eunice's roles in the narratives as compliant with the 21st Century politics. The work examines the prevailing political situation and explores the roles of the two females in salvaging the already battered polity, and projects 21st century politics as demanding collective participation of all citizens in governance.

NATURE OF POWER AND POLITICS

The prevailing political terrain in *Anthills of the Savannah* and *A Man of the People* portrays uneasy display of power and corruption by the ruling governments. Personal interests have been the bane of political powers as can be traced down the line, as presented in the texts under study. This point is stated by Innes & Lindfors (1994) describing "Nanga's values as equally ambiguous. At first sight he is a political opportunist whose only concerns are survival and self interest, without detachment of any kind he has no concept of political morality or of the national good" (260). This state of affairs creates tension, intrigues, highhandedness, threats and fear in the people leading to forms of agitation and protests. The scenario is best understood in the plot narratives of *Anthills of the Savannah* whereby for example, "there were unconfirmed rumours of unrest, secret trials and executions in the barracks. But His Excellency rode the storm quite comfortably..." (13). The issue of unrest forms major narrative in *Anthills of the Savannah* as well as in *A Man of the People*, whereby an atmosphere of poverty, fear and helplessness pervades the narratives. In the case of Chief Nanga, Akwanya (2017) observes in *Literary Criticism: From Formal to Question of Method* that "some of these rural people are following him obviously out of fear" (21). Fear and poverty become factors of gullibility among rural people. The problem is seen to be compounded by the people who in spite of the political ills remain passive in the matters of bad leadership and inherently endorse corruption and self interestedness of leaders as their own opportunity to slash the national cake.

With this apathy in the people, the leaders take advantage of their political powers to clinch and remain in power by all means. Hence they desperately seek to exterminate every perceived obstacle to that ambition and desire and command loyalty. This situation gets the reaction of Akwanya & Anohu (2001) in the event of political oppression represented in the narratives in *Anthills of the Savannah*:

Sam's inability to command instinctive loyalty and obedience even among his closest aides, especially the old school mates and boyhood friends Chris Oriko, the Commissioner for Information in his government, and Ikem Osodi, the editor of the *Gazette*, is a great source of resentment because it seems to take something from the absolute power he craves. When he gives up all subterfuge and attempts to enforce this discipline on the two, beginning with Ikem, he sets off the recoil in which all three of them perish. (166-7).

Similar pattern of event and reaction is noted in *A Man of the People*, whereby the Prime Minister is not ready to jeopardize his position and ambition of winning elections. He decides to take an unprofessional step to printing currency for circulation:

The prime Minister said, "No" to the plan. He was not going to risk losing the election by cutting down the price paid to coffee planters at the critical moment. The National Bank should be instructed to print fifteen million pounds. Two thirds of the Cabinet supported the Minister. The next morning the Prime Minister sacked them and in the evening he broadcast to the nation. He said the dismissed Ministers were conspirators and traitors who had teamed up with foreign saboteurs to destroy the new nation. (Achebe, 1996, 3-4).

Anthills of the Savannah presents a life's ambition of H.E. Sam for a life presidency which meets some opposition from his childhood friends, Ikem and Chris, both being key players in the government. Political leaders in both texts are seen to be selfish and egocentric and would not stand any form of opposition to their political ambitions.

Thus, in *Anthills of the Savannah*, H.E. Sam could not stand his two childhood friends questioning his president's -for -life ambition, and thus haunts them to death:

It happened at the very tricky moments when His Excellency had decided to retire all military members of his cabinet and to replace them with civilians and, to cap it all, add President to all his titles. There were unconfirmed rumours of unrest, secret trials and executions in the barracks. But His Excellency rode the storm quite comfortably ..." (Achebe, 1988).

This is the scenario in the text, giving rise to threats, incarcerations, haunting and eventual murder of the perceived saboteurs and traitors. In *A Man of the People*, the country is divided up into constituents, which amount simply to spheres of influence. In each of these the parliamentary representative seeks to function as a divine form, who dazzles the people and commands their instinctive loyalty and obedience. This is what Chief Nanga finds unbearable in Odili's challenge for his parliamentary seat. He will take every measure necessary to retain the seat but, he thinks he deserves to be returned unopposed' (Akwanja & Anohu, 2001).

The Prime Minister's quest in *A Man of the People* is to retain his position by all means as he is not ready to risk the elections. He thereby refuses to cut down the price he pays to coffee farmers, instead, he chooses to dismiss the Ministers and other Cabinet members who proffered professional advice on the financial situation. The highhandedness of the Prime Minister resulting in the sack of his Ministers is done in bad faith and thereby adds tension to the political climate. Using media propaganda against the ministers, the Prime Minister gains the support of the people against the alleged political opponents.

To cheaply achieve their ploy, leaders employ lie and propaganda in haunting their perceived opponents and in pitching them against public sympathy by labeling them traitors. The Prime Minister in *A Man of the People* announces in the media that, "he had been stabbed in the back by the very ingrates he had pulled out of oblivion ..." (Achebe, 1966). Such outburst caught the sympathy of people including that of Mr. Nanga who asserts that "they have bitten the finger with which their mother fed them" (6). He goes on to suggest death sentence on them, while others yelled abuse on the ministers calling them names: 'traitors', 'cowards'. The Government goes further in the state newspaper, the *Hansard*, to write a completely new speech to suit their desire. The fact that the public is swayed portrays their ignorance as they are tied with primitive loyalty to the reigning power.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, similar propagandist approach facilitated His Excellency's intimidation and dismissal of some of his Cabinet members, including the Editor of the State Newspaper *the Gazette*, Mr. Ikem Osodi and the sack and replacement of non-existing official designations in pretending to follow the bureaucratic process. His Excellency would not accept resignation from Chris, he taunts him, "where do you think you are? Westminster or Washington DC? Come on! This is a military government in a backward West African State called Kangan ..." Someday you will have a chance to change all that when you become the boss. Right now this boss here won't accept resignations unless of course he has taken the trouble himself to ask for them Right?" (Achebe, 133). This is an expression of despotism, intimidation and highhandedness. The eventual letter of suspension to Ikem was written and signed by 'a certain Chairman, Board of Directors of Kangan Newspapers Corporation, publishers of the National Gazette' (134). All these are done in a bid to enthrone and perpetuate domination and superiority with the aim of achieving political power.

Thus the driving impetus on the key power mongers in the texts is fear of failure and unflinching hope in retaining power. This idea is supported by the fact that "power is one of the intentions of mythic thought conditioned by either of two emotions fear and hope. As

a result, it totally dominates consciousness and keeps it enthralled" (Akwanya & Anohu, 2001, 161). The figures of His Excellency Sam and the Minister, Chief Nanga, are those of the rampaging rough beasts that brutalize their people in preference to their self-interest. Therefore the state of the nation at the time is such that "General Sam of Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* 'has exercised a hold over the people entirely by overbearing force before which they are cowed and in terror" (Akwanya & Anohu, 166), while in *A Man of the People* "Nanga becomes the name of a remarkable passage in the history of the nation, when, what was expected and longed for, comfort and repayment for years of shame and neglect have not come, instead, everything opposed to these, everything which tramples and makes mockery of the hope formerly entertained" (Akwanya & Anohu 168). These were the scenario of violence, unchallenged quest for power, hopelessness and despair by the male political leaders before the women, Beatrice and Eunice waded in. These 21st century women come with compassion for their people to salvage the political terrain through leading in the fight for a better leadership.

WOMEN AS VANGUARDS IN THE 21ST CENTURY POLITICS

Female roles in the 21st century politics as stipulated in the feminist political philosophy is deterministic and incontrovertible. This philosophy does not only help to understand the world of politics but to change it. This stresses the need to harness power for the political community away from the government. Beatrice and Eunice make obvious impact in arresting the problems of their societies by assuming definite roles of championing the course of fairness and justice. This role is re-iterated by Nwankwo in Ehling Ed. (1991), when he says, "the cavern of mother Idoto, earth Spirit, is neither factious nor discriminating in justice. Even though it is a female spirit, it protects the martial in times of grievances, just as well as it protects the humble at peace time" (60). Part of this spirit is actualized by Beatrice Okoh in *Anthills of the Savannah* as she brings about the needed change by her unique roles. This affirms the fact that politics or leadership in the 21st Century is not a matter of gender role or archetype but a matter of commitment to good leadership. As vanguards, women who show commitment such as Beatrice and Eunice have demonstrated that they can make a difference by taking the lead in bringing others to work together.

However, in order to play politics in the 21st Century Pedreira (2018), believes that "to get that point where innovation is not an experiment but a reality, it is necessary to rebuild the social fabric, that is, we must learn to trust in citizen's capacity". The implication of this

is that the political innovation and solutions necessary to rebuild the social fabric involves understanding the roles of citizens in the 21st Century. Pedreira further states that "ultimately, we are talking about types of politics that is more human, more accountable, more transparent, tolerant, organic, and experimentation and focused on the public good" (Online). The 21st Century politics or leadership is citizen centered and not selfish. Hence, the women in the narratives: Beatrice and Eunice, represent the citizens, irrespective of gender. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Beatrice the girlfriend of Chris Oriko, who is the center of consciousness gathers the broken human fragments together in her home. The remark which Beatrice makes to Captain Abdul Medani and Emmanuel the intelligent student leader lies at the heart of the novel. She asks: "what must a people do to appease an embittered history?" (Achebe, 1988, 220). Similar question is asked by Eunice in *A man of the People* as she bemoans the vile and vices of male politicians who are only concerned with self-aggrandizement, saying, "that's all they care for, women , cars, landed property ... But what else can you expect when intelligent people leave politics to illiterates like Chief Nanga?" (Achebe, 1966, 87). The questions asked by these unique women are the promptings that guide their actions towards efforts to salvage the entire society not only the women folk.

Thus, Eunice is part of the revolutionary party's leaders made up of professionals who seek to wrestle power from the corrupt, mediocre politicians who had decided to forge a common front by forming the common people's party. She is the only lady in the party's leadership with an outstanding personality described as 'a very beautiful lawyer' and engaged to Max...' (*A Man of the People* 87). While at the party's inaugural meeting in Max's house she announces that the unemployed would be members of the party when it fully takes off. With this, Eunice assumes the role of the vanguard, being in the forefront of policy making in the party. For her, the party is inclusive, accommodating all, irrespective of profession, age, or gender. She expresses a very superb argument that gets even Odili intimidated and which received much applause from the colleagues. Part of the answer to Beatrice's earlier question is still her comment that 'this would belong to the world not to any little caucus, no matter how talented' (*Anthills of the Savanna*). This is in sync with Eunice's earlier assertion and call on intellectuals like Max and the rest to come out of their tower of 'elephant tusk' into active politics.

In the essay 'Goddess of the Savannah, Beatrice as Achebe's Sensible Solution' Singler (2015) observes that "Achebe reconstructs the place of women in the novels' Post Colonial Society through the character Beatrice. Scholars agree that Beatrice is a shift from Achebe's earlier women who many argue is

portrayed as flat, domestic and passive. 'Beatrice is a dynamic and round character; independent, educated, unmarried, compassionate, and politically active' Beatrice reflects a 21st Century woman politically and socially active and different from the stereotypical colonial and postcolonial women whose preoccupation is to fight for equality of sex. This breaking with stereotypes reveals a new beginning, a subverting of the post colonial gender roles. Beatrice leads the change, encouraging others to queue into what is present.

A clear and strong similarity exists between Beatrice and Eunice as both serve as sources of passion and inspiration to the men around them. They both, in varying ways, help to rewrite the culture for the future. Beatrice showed extreme passion in wading through the rough times of incarceration with Chris and Ikem. Beatrice is not only an inspiration to the men but to all around her. She becomes the rallying point at the time of crisis such that, "in the weeks and months that followed, her flat became virtually the home of Emmanuel and Braimoh and the girl Adamma. The Captain also came quite frequently. Sometimes, especially at weekends, they would all be there together and discuss the deepening crisis in the country" (*Anthills of the Savannah* 203). Similar roles of inspiration are represented in the narratives as played by Eunice. She is a leading force in the campaign and very supportive of Max her fiancé. Though she does not speak much, she holds a large influence. Her cool demeanor attracts the admiration of Odili, who seeing them so confident expresses his commendation to Eunice, saying, "I envied Max his beautiful, dedicated girl, some people are simply lucky'. I wish I could bring Edna there to see them" (*A Man of the People* 136). Eunice's dedication to the course of Max's political revolution is equally an advancement of the stereotypical roles of women. She equally endorses Max's suggestion to the launching of their party's campaign, even when it is impromptu. Her response, "why not indeed?" (137), gives Max the courage to go on with the campaign.

Throughout the campaign, Eunice remains a strong ally and supporter to the political revolution and fight against bad leadership. Her brave action and show of solidarity to Max prompts the shooting of Chief Koko whose car ran over Max from behind, and killed him on the spot. "Then she opened her handbag as if to take out a handkerchief, took one pistol instead and fired two bullets into Chief Koko's chest. Only then did she fall down on Max's body and begin to weep like a woman" (160). The demonstration of bravery by Eunice makes her different and "strange" (160). Her eventual shedding of tears is a confirmation of the woman in her. She did not wait for any approval to do what she did, uncharacteristic of a woman, contrary to Pearce (2015) who asserts that, "as women, we like very much to please others—sometimes seeking approval so

frantically that we become torn and confused by the conflicting needs of those around us". In her uniqueness, Eunice goes against all odds to damn the consequences of her action as she faces the law. Like Beatrice who sheds tears as an antidote to bottled up emotion, the shedding of tears for the women is a regaining of strength and poise for greater composure. The task before them is great and they have thrown their weight to take the lead to salvage the decay in the polity and save their societies from bad government.

CONCLUSION

The prevailing political display in *Anthills of the Savannah* and *A Man of the People* was that of unease, tension and intrigues. These were coupled with the attendant corruption. All these are against the tenets of 21st Century governance which is all encompassing. The actions and roles of the women, Beatrice and Eunice project the demand for the 21st Century style of politics and leadership which place much premium on collective and affirmative action by all concerned. The 21st century advocates a political movement that has women on the lead for public awareness and active participation as against the general passiveness of the people on political events. This collective demand is best described by Pedreira (2018), saying that "the 21st century demand for politics requires, "a political transformation that will not come from a single place, nor will it come only from the State but will be like in a dance, where the partners know they have different steps but are moving to the same rhythm". This gives the demand of a collective action not a gender based role. Women in politics assume the last hope expected to clean up the dredge and lead the new narrative of complimentary leadership to redeem the tattered political sphere. This was exemplified by Beatrice and Eunice who took bold, dogged, determinist, purposeful and deliberate steps against all odds to dismantle the corrupt male dominated governments.

The 21st Century politics also demands "the resilience of the ordinary people who, undeterred, resume building networks of solidarity among themselves, their backs firmly turned to those in charge at the political level" (Akwanya, 2013, 493). This resilience is the core of the impulse in the efforts of Beatrice and Eunice in changing the political paradigm. This comes as a revolution that is gradual but yielding positively. Leadership in the 21st century therefore, must be with passion. This passion is exhibited in Beatrice and Eunice.

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