CONFlict of Interests: Beatrice Playing the Role of a MediAtor in Chinua Achebe’s Anthills of the Savannah

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Abstract
Chinua Achebe’s Anthills of the Savannah (1987) is usually read as a record of military dictatorship, power play, conflicts, intimidations, disagreements, and misunderstandings in the society. There are indications of conflicts among characters on issues of interests. The clash of interests leads to eventual breakdown into oppressive conflicts as observed in the relationship among the trio of Sam, Chris and Ikem. The three childhood friends eventually reached a fatal and murderous conflict situation because none could shift their position. To contain these disagreements, mediation, a process of conflict resolution without recourse to litigations is employed. At the center of these mediatory efforts is Beatrice, playing significant roles in bridging the antagonism between, and among the disagreeing colleagues. This paper studies the clash of interests among the three friends in Anthills of the Savannah, as well as, the crucial roles of mediation as conflict resolution applied by Beatrice in the turn of the events. In conclusion the paper views Beatrice as projecting a new role for the women in modern African literary narratives.

Key Words: Conflict, Mediation, Mediator, Dictatorship, Resolution, Interest, Escalation.

Introduction:
Most literary critics have studied Chinua Achebe’s Anthills of the Savannah as a political or social novel recounting the period of military dictatorship in the country. As contained in the ‘Introduction’ to Critical Approaches to Anthills of the Savannah, ‘no doubt, Anthills of the Savannah … comprises the sum total of Achebe’s political and literary thinking as well as of his attempts to come to terms with Nigerian politics and society’ (Holger Ehling 1). Similarly as posited by Omar Sougou, Anthills of the Savannah peruses and probes into the world of power and military dictatorship’ (Ehling 35). Whereas, David Maughan writes that, ‘the novel is the fictional product of twenty-one years of political experience and contemplation on the part of a highly, and deservedly, respected author convinced of the fictional obligations of literature's duty to teach and lead his or her people…’ (Ehling 13).These political ideas and others are viewed to have dominated the study of the novel. Diverse thematic explorations and standpoints on the novel coming as essays include, Akin Odebunmi’s, ‘Place Names in Anthills of the Savannah’. This essay studies names for thematic and stylistic purposes’. Okain Teiko’s ‘The Concept of Tragedy in Achebe’s Anthills of the Savannah and Mofolo’s Chaka’ postulates that ‘Chinua Achebe and Thomas Mofolo follow the universal tradition of artistic reconstruction of the image of dictatorship to examine the nature of power and authority in Anthills of the Savannah and Chaka’ (Teiko112). While Uzoechi Nwagbara in ‘Sexist’s Matters: Power Play and Gendered Space in Chinua Achebe’s Anthills of the Savannah’ describes the novel as a ‘national tragedy … principally relayed by three friends: Ikem, Chris and Beatrice’ (Nwagbara 1). Issues on women had discussions on them. In an essay, ‘Outsiders or Insiders?: Women in Anthills of the Savannah’, Rose Acholonu in ‘Eagles on the Iroko comments on the level of women involvement in the political and social affairs. She observes that, ‘Achebe clearly argues in support of greater women’s involvement in social and political life’ (hekweazu 319). While all these essays have approached the text from the thematic perspectives, A. N. Akwanya’s ‘Need that Throbs at the Heart: Solidarity in Chinua Achebe’s Anthills of the Savannah’ makes a literary study of the text dwelling on the humanity of the characters. This essay ‘Conflict
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Conflicts of Interests Among Key Characters.

‘Unless people live in virtual isolation, they are bound to occasionally experience conflicts in their interactions with others’ (U.Tulane online). Hence there are issues of conflicts occasioned by incompatibility of interests and attitudes among individuals. This idea is advanced by R. J. Rummel who observes that: ‘humanity is composed of individuals, each a separate universe, a dynamic psychological field…. We each have our own perception, interests, personality, and disposition. But each of us, somehow, also establishes an order with others, a social field, a society within which we can cooperate with others’ (Rummel online). This predisposes individuals living together to possible disagreements that may lead to conflict. We can understand that conflict, violence and war are a hallmark of a diverse society. Conflict is viewed as ‘a social phenomenon generated and supported by a number of psychological factors of which attitude formation is undoubtedly the most important’ (Bercovitch, Victor and William 8). This places attitude as the most used concepts in conflict studies as it defines the parties evaluative and response tendencies in conflict situations. Another key issue in the analysis of any conflict concerns the identity of the parties. Bercovitch again uses the term ‘parties in conflict’ to mean individuals, groups, organizations, nations, or other systems in conflict’ (4). The key conflict parties in Anthills of the Savannah include His Excellency, Sam the President; Chris Oriko, the Honourable Commissioner for Information, Ikem Osodi, the editor of National Gazette, and Beatrice Oko, a Secretary, who is the mediator.

Conflict situations in Anthills of the Savannah are dynamic as it escalates and de-escalates to rapid complications. This process of conflict escalation is seen as ‘complex and unpredictable as new issues and conflict parties can emerge. Internal power struggles can alter tactics and goals and secondary conflicts and spirals can further complicate the situation’ (Ramsbotham II). The hot exchange of words between Chris and Sam results in the immediate suspension of Ikem and a later unexpected chase for Chris. Very swiftly, Sam makes good his threat by swooping on Ikem sooner than expected. In this situation Sam is seen to employ what Kenneth Boulding (1989) called “threat power, do what I want or I will do what you do not want” (Ramsbotham 20). This spirals into subsequent incarceration and murder. As posited by Chimalum Nwankwo, ‘to succeed in the presence of His Excellency means total subservience. This is rewarded either with admission into his cabal of executive responsibility with its prerequisites, or, when ignored, punished with ignominious dismissal, incarceration or death’ (Ehling 57). Unfortunately, Chris’ outright defiance to Sam’s instruction landed them into fatal trouble. ‘Talking about the nature of conflict, Johan Galtung observes in Ramsbotham that ‘… conflict parties’ interest may clash or the relationship they are in becomes oppressive. Conflict parties then organize around this structure, to pursue their interest. They develop hostile attitudes and conflictual behaviours’ (Ramsbotham10). Thus, conflicts of interest form the backbone of the contentions in Anthills of the Savannah and thereby require intervention by way of mediation.

As the contentions escalate and degenerate into conflicts, mediation an informal process of settling conflicts is employed to get the embattled parties together without going to court. Thus, in mediation, the parties meet in a private, confidential setting to work out a solution to their problem with the help of a neutral third person, the mediator. Mediation therefore, is defined as:

A facilitative process in which disputing parties engage the assistance of an impartial third party, the mediator, who helps them to try to arrive at an agreed resolution of their dispute. The mediator has no authority to make any decision that are binding on them, but uses certain procedures, techniques and skills to help them to negotiate an agreed resolution of their dispute without adjudication (Justice M. Jagannadhda Rao online).

Mediation is very important in a conflict situation, acting as a catalyst in resolving the warring parties. It is a negotiation carried out with the assistance of a third party. Also, Mediation defined in the ‘Introduction to Managing a Mediation Process’ is ‘an art form incorporating intuition, subtlety and vision. Yet it is also a craft with transferable tools, definable tasks and management challenges’ (Smith and David 9). ‘The mediator is a person with patience, persistence and common sense. She/he has an arsenal of negotiation techniques, human dynamics skills and powers of effective listening, articulation and restatement. The
mediator is a facilitator who has no power to render a resolution to the conflict. The parties will fashion the solution as the mediator moves through the process’ (Rummel Online). These definable tasks are performed by Beatrice who assumes the role of a mediator. Beatrice identifies Ikem’s and Chris’ positions on the conflicts and the issues that divide them, including their perceptions and misperceptions of each other and fosters a problem solving atmosphere.

Bringing out the diverse aspects of conflicts of interest and ideas among these key characters, it is observed that: ‘Social distances and social interests lie within the socio-cultural field. They are actualized within the medium of meanings, values, and norms. Other forces exist, however, and these are basically psychological. The self and needs are forces, as are the forces towards a psychological balance between interests, perception, and personality’ (Rummel online). Following this, conflict parties in the text have one conflicting interest or position against the other. Hence, the inability to reach a consensus or to see things from a common point of interest or position arouses conflicts and misunderstandings. It is an opinion that ‘the identity of the conflict parties, the levels at which the conflict is contested and the issues fought over may vary over time and may themselves be disputed’ (Ransbotham 10). In Anthills of the Savannah, what started as a mini and negligible misunderstanding snowballed into a despicable hate situation and eventually into a tyranny of unmitigated oppression.

Achebe records the fact of the already tensed relationships right from the opening lines of the novel with Sam saying: ‘the matter is closed, I said. How many times, for God’s sake, am I expected to repeat it? Why do you find it so difficult to swallow my ruling. On anything?... For a full minute or so the fury of his eyes lay on me. Briefly our eyes had been locked in combat. … Long silence. But he was not appeased… I conceded victory there as well (Anthills of the Savannah I). As Chris expressed, ‘I have thought of all this as a game that began innocently enough and then went suddenly strange and poisonous. But I may prove to be too sanguine even in that’ (2). The real cause of the conflict perceived by Chris as a minor misunderstanding is related to what Mitchell (1981:18) refers to as ‘mis-match between social values and social structure’ (Ransbotham 9). The misunderstanding is a form of symmetric conflict with its contradictions, whereby the contradiction is defined by the parties’ clash of interests. Sam feels sabotaged and aggrieved that his childhood friends Chris and Ikem, do not support his interest in President for life. Using the occasion of a cabinet meeting, he made open his suspicion during which they are tagged ‘professional dissidents’ and ‘heretics’. He alleges the involvement of Ikem who is referred to as a ‘self-seeking saboteur’ in the fiasco of foiled presidential referendum and reminds him of being a potential culprit. This trial by proxy is an expression of fear and threatened self-interest by Sam. Expressing disgust with Sam’s attitude, Uzoechi Nwagbara describes him as ‘a military dictator and inept leader who relies on brute force, hegemony and violence to consolidate his leadership and power base’ (Nwagbara 2). Sam’s use of raw power and coercion escalates the conflict situation beyond expectation. It is seen as ‘a classic example of cultural conflict evident in Sam whose studied mannerisms are described as an attempt to imitate an English gentle man of leisure’ (Kanganayakam 39). In retaliation, Sam vows to take turn to humiliate and disgrace Ikem out of office by suspending his appointment, and later haunts Chris.

Another level of conflict is between Chris and Ikem mostly perceived as a conflict of interest. What plays out between the two is more of attitude, or war of feeling and belief. Ikem is encountered as a crusader using his journalistic prowess. For him ‘passion is our hope and strength, a very present help in trouble’ (Anthills of the Savannah 35). But Chris feels that Ikem is unnecessarily unbearable by resisting his advice on the need to apply editorial restraint. He sees Ikem’s style of writing as antagonistic and crusading. Chris complains to Beatrice that, ‘what divides us is style and not substance. And that is absolutely unbridgeable’ (108). The inability of Chris and Ikem to come to an early understanding makes it easy for them to fall prey to the molestation by their friend, Sam. Chris further complains that his entreaties yield no result. ‘We have gone over this matter a million times and I’m getting quite sick and tired of repeating it. That’s why I have said a hundred million times to Ikem. Lie low for a while and this gathering tornado may rage and pass overhead carrying away roof-tops and perhaps… only perhaps… leave us battered but alive’ (Anthills of the Savannah 109). But alas, the wind blew them off because Ikem cannot be cowed. Ikem is somewhat a determined personality ready to march to the stakes and take the bullet at the chest. Postulating on the two friends’ attitude that, ‘the conflicting analyses result in serious conflict between the two friends. They cannot see eye to eye anymore and no longer seek opportunities for face to face meetings. Ikem believes he cannot get the cooperation he needs from Chris because this friend is now driven by petty personal motives and is competing with other people for favor from the president’ (Akwanya, A.N 489). It is believed that Ikem’s position is incompatible with Chris’ and as each takes priority in defending their personal interests the conflict arena accelerates to a level of indefensible attack by His Excellency.
There is a relational conflict recorded between His Excellency and the Cabinet members. In this case, no particular issue or interest is seen to divide the parties, but the conflict lies in the very structure of who they are and the relationship between them as a team. This is described by Johan Galtung 1969 as “asymmetric”, which is defined by the parties, their relationship and the conflict of interest inherent in the relationship” (Ramsbotham 29). This instance exists in the usual state of tensed atmosphere between His Excellency and his Commissioners at cabinet meetings. The ideal relationship between the President and his cabinet members is lacking. ‘They see him as demi-god. He treats them with ignominy and has very little regard for them’ (Ononiwu and Njamanze 96). For example, in the episode following the presence of a crowd of protesters at the government house, His Excellency sneers at his Commissioners and holds them hostage because none has a prior hint about the protesters. ‘That is what I mean when I say that I have no executive council. Can you see what I mean now, all of you? Take your seats gentlemen and stay there’ (Anthills of the Savannah 9). His Excellency’s intolerance and disregard of the Commissioners is a sign of conflict since it involves coercion and threats. He glories in reminding them, ‘you all seem to forget that I am still a soldier, not a politician’ (4). The aforementioned indicate that conflict situations contained in the texts are both violent and non-violent. Hence, in this study, emphasis will be laid on the mediatory roles of Beatrice in bridging the gap between Chris and Ikem, on one hand, and among Sam, Chris and Ikem, the three childhood school friends, on the other hand.

Beatrice the Mediator

In Achebe’s defense, most critics do find that he has presented a somewhat more palatable view of women in Anthills of the Savannah. ‘Achebe’s attitude to women in Anthills of the Savannah is therefore the consequence of present African experience, validating the existence of certain kinds of women enjoying a setting totally different from that of their predecessors’ (Ehling 65). Thus, Beatrice Okoh, the female mediator, is endowed with exceptional prowess. Before hand, Ikem has drawn Beatrice’s attention to her expected role ‘as a woman, as a modern woman with a new role, where woman in her supremacy will descend and sweep the shards together, in the name, Nneka, mother is supreme’ (Anthills of the Savannah 90). Though the new role is not explicit, Beatrice accepts the charge. This is enshrined in her status as a traditional woman, as the daughter of Idemili even without her knowing it. Ikem sees beyond and understands this role. ‘Thus, with Beatrice, Achebe projects a new vision of women’s roles and clarifies Ikem’s hazy thoughts on the issue…. Through Beatrice, Achebe strives to affirm the moral strength and intellectual integrity of African women….’ (Hungwe and Hungwe 4). The work of women intervention is already enshrined in the traditional society. Beatrice feels that, ‘giving women today the same role which traditional society gave them of intervening only when everything else has failed is not enough. It is not enough that women should be the court of last resort because the last resort is a damn sight too far and too late’ (Anthills of the Savannah 84). Beatrice mediating between Chris and Ikem is not out of place, having known the two and the domain of both individuals.

Beatrice’s mediatory role heightens as she draws Chris’ attention to the growing resentment between him and Ikem. ‘She asks him, ‘“Do you notice how much he resents you now?” I don’t think you are even aware of it. It bothers me because it wasn’t there before. I can see plenty of trouble ahead for the two of you’ (Anthills of the Savannah 59). This warning gets them startled as they begin to understand the level of strained relationship between them as a result of conflicting interests. This has blurred their vision to the precarious degeneration in the relationship between them and their childhood friend turned despotic President, Sam. But Chris isn’t in the picture about the urgency of the situation. He only thinks that the resentment is natural. Within this conflicting space, Beatrice embarks on reconciliation of ‘Ikem and Chris, being at the center of the game she equally stands a better place among the three to perceive the depth of animosity brewing among Sam, Chris and Ikem. She is set to act and proffer a truce, hence, she warns Chris. ‘And I see trouble building up for us. It will get to Ikem first. No joking, Chris. He will be the precursor to make straight the way. But after him it will be you. We are all in it, Ikem, you, me and even him. The thing is no longer a joke. … You and Ikem must quickly patch up this ridiculous thing between you that nobody has ever been able to explain to me’ (Anthills of the Savannah105). The fact of conflicts is exposed by the argument between Sam and Chris, “At last! But God knows I did not ask for it. It’s you my oldest friends, you and Ikem who swore for reasons best known to you to force a show-down. What more can I say except: so be it…” (132). There are allegations and insinuations of sabotage from Sam against his friends that create a lot of conflict and tension. This however goes down to direct accusation, thus he continues:

Listen. The way I see it this matter is not likely to end with mere suspension for conspiring with thugs to invade the Presidential Palace. That may be only the merest tip of the iceberg. There is some indication that Ikem might have colluded with these same people to Sabotage
the presidency referendum two years ago. I don’t mind telling you that your own role in that fiasco was never cleared up satisfactorily either and may well come up for further investigation’ (Anthills of the Savannah133). It becomes obvious that Chris and Ikem are fighting a common threat from the official quarters unknowingly, while also having to deal with their personal resentments. Beatrice wades in to mediate between Chris and Ikem.

In doing this Beatrice does not decide who is right or wrong neither does she force the disputing parties to reach agreement or to accept particular settlement terms. She uses persuasion and conviction to make Chris assess the danger lurking around them and make him to shift his mindset on Ikem even as he complains, ‘…But oh no! Ikem is outraged that I should recommend such cowardly and totally unworthy behaviour to him you yourself have been witness to it again and again. And you are now asking me to go yet again and go on my knees and ask an artist who has the example of Don Quixote and other fictional characters to guide him…’ (108). ‘BB I can’t talk to Ikem anymore. I am tired. And drained of all stamina’. Beatrice insists, ‘No Chris. You have more stamina than you think’ (Anthills of the Savannah 105). Continuing further over lunch Beatrice exposes the game plan and blackmail by Sam and some of his cabinet members against the two, based on her experience of the event of the government house cocktail party she attended the previous night. She pleads with Chris passionately ‘to agree to patch things up with Ikem. ‘What I heard and saw last night frightened me. Ikem was being tried and convicted there in absentia. You have to save him, Chris’ (Anthills of the Savannah 108). Chris eventually agrees to do something noting that, ‘there may be no time at all left… I should do something; I agree, but what? You see there is nothing concrete on which Ikem and I quarrel. What divides us is style not substance. And that is absolutely unbridgeable.’ (108). Beatrice helps him to understand the situation better as she remains the prophetess who foresees the future; and a ‘pure mediator’ ‘with powerful Communication’ (Ramsbotham 18). Beatrice applies interrogation, and negotiation while assuming a neutral position uncommitted to any particular outcome. In this vein, according to Sheldon J. Stark, ‘mediators listen to stories… and keep their opinion to themselves’ (Stark, Online). Beatrice after listening to Chris’ complaint about his friend Ikem, encourages him to do more, ‘we could decide though, couldn’t we, that it was silly and futile to quarrel over our likes and dislikes’ (Anthills of the Savannah108). Chris is already yielding to her plea as he responds, “Yes”, he answered eagerly, “As long as we are not fanatical. If either of us is a fanatic then there can be no hope of a settlement. We will disagree as long as we live’ (108). Imbued with a special calling and unique responsibility, the parties are empowered to solve their problem in workable terms to achieve a "win-win" solution. Not minding that Chris feels tremendously aggrieved, he is to soften his resentment against Ikem.

Beatrice as a mediator is described as a ‘generation changer’ (Nwagbar 3) who helps the conflicting parties to identify and appreciate the risks presented by the conflict. Nwagbar further posits that, ‘Achebe uses Beatrice to illustrate his ideo-aesthetic perspective on new woman as a departure from his previous refraction of womanhood’ (Nwagbar 17). Attesting to the exceptional prowess possessed by Beatrice, Bunali Tabbildar writes that Achebe creates Beatrice, as a strong, independent-minded, and politically empowered Nigerian woman’ (Tabbidar Online). While Kanaganyakam praises Beatrice as the, ‘most important female character that Achebe has created’ and that the “modern Beatrice” is also a “goddess and a muse” (45). These qualify Beatrice for the role of mediation as a bridge to conflict. Based on this, the image of Beatrice as a mediator and a party in the extended conflict is contextualized.

By this act Beatrice fractures the paradigm of masculinity and she represents a counter narrative by wading into the crises that follows and being at the very center of it. Beatrice receives every accolade as an ideal beautiful woman, very strong, Nwanyibuife, the new modern woman with the new role of integration. In the essay, ‘Achebe’s Women: Mothers, Priestesses, and Young Urban Professionals’, Catherine Bicknell opines that Beatrice maintains the job of integration and mediation as, ‘she ends up functioning in exactly that capacity for Elewa, during her pregnancy and after the birth of Ikem’s child, and for the little group of survivors who have gathered around them at the end of the novel’ (Ihekweazu 276). Therefore in the fictional realm, ‘Achebe believes that the time is now for the new nation of Africa, to invoke the female principle’, which ultimately challenges public-private dichotomy by considering every individual as a part of the public and a partaker in economic, social, and political actions’ (Nwagbar 10). This posits a modern society with a change in power and ideas, exemplified in the mediating roles and functions performed by Beatrice.

Conclusion and Recommendation

The dimensions of conflict and mediatory activities x-rayed so far account to this reality of Achebe’s vision of humanity and society as an affirmation of differences, including differences in interest, attitudes and behaviours. ‘Achebe’s aesthetic preoccupation with the expansion of the public sphere finds resonance
in the narrative of *Anthills of the Savannah*, where he modifies his previous idea of women thereby seeing them as political actors and people with a voice capable of changing gender relations through participation in the business of the public sphere’ (Nwagbara 5). Beatrice’s role in performing the naming ceremony of Elewa’s daughter places her on a pedestal. ‘The name of Elewa’s baby is to be a thing of hope. ‘We shall call this child Amaechina ‘May-the- path-never-close. Ama for short…. The path of Ikem … May it never close, never overgrow’ (*Anthills of the Savannah* 206). Isidore Okeawolam Diala finds ‘in Beatrice’s actions and comments an exemplification of a radical new thinking’ (Dia, Online). The action negates the age-long tradition of the ritual as an exclusive preserve of the male gender. The creation of the character of Beatrice as a mediator foresees a change in Achebe’s view of womanhood. Through Beatrice, Achebe strives to affirm the moral strength and intellectual integrity of African women especially since the social conditions which have kept women down in the past era are now largely absent. The good thing about the change is the ready acceptance of the naming rite by Elewa’s uncle, as exemplified in his prayers over the kola. ‘Their intentions are good, their mind on the right road. Only the hand fails to throw as straight as the eyes sees … what brings us here is the child you sent us. May her path be straight…’ (211). Elewa’s uncle has by this accepted the change necessary for human survival. Optimistically, ‘Achebe’s newly envisioned female’s roles are to be expanded, articulated and secured by women themselves, and the modern African woman is doing just that’ (Hungwe and Hungwe 4). Beatrice represents the true spirit and heart of the new woman with new roles in the scheme of things. The paper therefore recommends that in a waring situation parties should be well disposed to shifting grounds for the sake of the societies they represent, just as they are ready to reconcile. Finally that the spirit of the woman and motherhood is significant for the existence of every society.
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