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Milieu, Meaning and Message in *Anthills of the Savannah, Survivor and Petals of Blood*

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Abstract:

The term, Third World, today has a succession in the fourth world and thus no more ranks low in the hierarchy of the developing nations of the world. The non-colonial block surely has contributed to this grouping, although much of the Third World does not use English and has never been part of the British colonial system. Common factors make this natural. First, whatever the colonial power, the colonial experience has shaped the consciousness of most Third World nations. Second, the common economic, social and political problems of the Third World form part of the context shared by writers in these nations. Within this are contained writers as diverse in experience, concern and style as, say, V.S. Naipaul (b.1932) or Wole Soyinka (b. 1934). The mixture of what is 'shared' points to the reality of this grouping, just as the distinctions of the various national literatures and individual talents mark its limitations. As Trevor James puts it, "What is shared includes the experience of English traditions, culture and literature; historical parallels in the process of colonization and decolonization; and, often, the emergence of a local literature in English along with a new cultural awareness in which the writer may be torn between his creative aspirations and the needs of his society."

This paper is an exploration into Third World literature within the parameters spelled out in the quotation mentioned above (James 5). It chooses, however, a different grouping comprising an English language writer – Chinua Achebe (b. 1930) from Nigeria – and a Bhasha writer – Gopinath Mohanty (1914-1992) from Orissa, India and a rebel who is averse to write in English today – Ngugi. Thus the research is based on the belief that this unusual combination of canonical and a non-canonical talent would best demonstrate the Third World literary response.

Keywords: Third World, non-canonical, monolithic, indigenous, tyrannous and narcissism

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This paper is an exploration into Third World literature within the parameters spelled out in the quotation mentioned above (James 5). It chooses, however, a different grouping comprising an English language writer – Chinua Achebe (b. 1930) from Nigeria – and a Bhasa writer – Gopinath Mohanty (1914-1992) from Orissa, India and a rebel who is averse to write in English today – Ngugi. Thus the research is based on the belief that this unusual combination of canonical and a non-canonical talent would best demonstrate the Third World literary response.

There is a sense in which the literature from the Third World can be termed as resistance literature. It seeks to fight the colonially-sponsored distortions and misrepresentations of the people of the East. As its centre there is an alternative way of conceiving human history. It is closely linked with decolonization. The purpose of this literature is to express the identity and integrity of the indigenous culture. It recognizes the involvement of the indigenous people in the production of local knowledge. Thus the attempt of the literatures from the newly awakened Third World is not only to retrieve the culture of the colonized but also to develop this as an anti-colonial mode of resistance.

Given this wide ranging definition of the literature resistance, it needs to be mentioned here that resistance is not a monolithic and reductive concept. As used in this paper, it is a capacious and inclusive concept which articulates a response to the three states of restitution, disintegration and disillusionment. These constitute the totality of the Third World literary response. This thesis seeks to demonstrate this by analyzing selective novels viz. *Anthills of Savannah*, *Survivor* and *Petals of Blood* by three Third World writers, Chinua Achebe of Nigeria and Gopinath Mohanty of Orissa (India) and Ngugi of Kenya respectively. Their works slotted under the three rubrics of "fiction of restitution", "fiction of disintegration" and "fiction of disillusionment" respectively are meant to cover the pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial phases of the evolutionary process that the Third World societies have passed through.

The novel being the major literary form of East-West encounter becomes the privileged site where the Third World literary response is shaped and articulated. There was a blend in it of the Western epistemology of rationality and truth and the Eastern Epistemology which entailed an emphasis on legends, myths, epics and orature. It is far more rewarding to



study the Third World novel than the literary works belonging to European canon if one wanted to know about one's own history and culture.

The commonality of struggle; the naivety of Igbos-Parajas-Mau Maus; the brazen rebellion of the women; the treatment of the outsider and the grim tales of suffering sought to be told by means of a multiple narratology form the main refrain of this study. Achebe's novel *Anthills* is primarily different from *Petals of Blood* and *Survivor* of Mohanty since it is difficult to pinpoint and say that such and such a character is a villain. The real villain in *Anthills* is Power itself. In the *Survivor*-the quest for power by the protagonist Balidatta makes him a loner and a villain who craves for the sympathy of reader and in *Petals of Blood*, Wanja unwittingly becomes a fallen woman but not a villain. As Ikem says in *Anthills*: "Those who would see no blot of villainy in the beloved oppressed nor grant the faintest glimmer of humanity to the hated oppressor are patriots and party-liners." (100)

Man is an intermix of both good and evil in unequal proportions. The novel seeks to indict the right reactionaries as well as the left adventurers. Achebe seems to strike a middle-path based on the Igbo-concept of duality in things, one thing balancing and correcting the other. He also focuses on the significance and inevitability of contradictions governing and influencing events, and people. He observes: "Contradictions if well understood and managed can spark off the fires of invention. Orthodoxy whether of the right or the left is the graveyard of creativity." (100) A human being is neither wholly good, nor wholly bad, but a blend of the two. The strength of the three works studied here is that they recognize forces in man, if well managed will instill creative energy for a suitable intermix in the making of a better individual and community. Beatrix, Wanja and Saroja are the three female protagonists whose unspoilt outlook in the Hegelian dialectics of thesis and antithesis merging into a higher synthesis needs to be explored in a new paradigm. Hence these writers cannot create out and out villains among the oppressors' philosophical projections, turn creativity with its essential ingredients of beautifully liberal and constructive ideas into works of art so much so that Mohanty, Achebe and Ngugi could be seen as a modern Dostoevsky, Tolstoy and Chekov. Hence we have Christopher Oriko, Commissioner for Information, Ikem Osodi, editor of the *National Gazette* (an official state organ) and Beatrice Okoh-a careerist-bureaucrat, attached to the Ministry of Finance as the principal protagonists in the novel. All of them are "been to's" and are educated in England. They know each other very well to build a unique trust but power is the villain amongst them. Chris exclaims with a sense of pride: "We are all connected. You cannot tell the story of any of us without implicating the others. Ikem may resent me but he probably resents Sam even more and Sam resents both of us most vehemently. We are too close together." (66) Probably the post colonial people, though redeemed politically are still the same economically. Hence as Chris says 'We (Asians/Africans) are too close together' and hence here the three Achebe-Mohanty-Ngugi strike the chord for us to study

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; by the millennium afterwards, no! New Oppressors will have been readying themselves secretly in the undertow long before the tidal wave got really going. (99)

Beatrice asks her young friends: “What must a people do to appease an embittered history.” (220) This query of the female protagonist seems to be crucial in the context of *Anthills of the Savannah*. A quick look at the fictional scenario of Achebe from his *Things Fall Apart* to *A Man of the People* will help us find the clue. A discerning reader could well find in *Anthills* useful suggestions by way of a positive response to the query.

Things Fall Apart, No Longer at Ease and *Arrow of God* deal with the rise and fall of their respective individual protagonists whose unhappy and sad end could be attributed to the machinations of colonialism. To that extent, they evoke the sympathy and pity of readers. In *A Man of the People*, Achebe’s target of attack is no longer a George Allen, a Winter-bottom or a Green, but the indigenous political leadership as represented by Nanga and this is where he strikes a chord with Mohanty, the Odiya novelist who is thoroughly disillusioned with the rule of law of the new rulers who have stepped into the shoes of their erstwhile colonial masters in a country “where the majority of the peasants and workers live in shacks and can afford only pails of excrement,” strikes both as a symbol of corruption and as an unhappy contrast to the sordid predicament of the people.

Achebe, in a Post modernistic way shows how the political leadership is shrewd enough to sense the mood of the people in a situation that organizes rigging of elections on an unprecedented scale. It becomes a free-for-all and the forces of violence unleashed by the leadership boomerang on itself ultimately, culminating in a “military take-over” which “seemed a cathartic and pragmatic necessity at the time. But the euphoric of the interim military rule proved more fatal.” Normally Achebe writes of the fall of values and they are a kind of dirge on the civilian rule paving the way for a succession of coups and change of governments at regular intervals in Nigeria, and in doing this he is at his post modernistic best.

Nevertheless, the best of Achebe comes out when he is at his satirical outbursts on the deplorable political scenario of the country immediately after independence (in the 1960s). Thus *Anthills of the Savannah* is an indictment of the rule by the army in the last quarter of the present century. The remedy turns out to be worse than the disease. This is the truth with Mohanty who shows in his *Danapani* or *The Survivor* how people like Arun, the teacher are worse than the British. In *Danapani*, Mohanty talks of the female protagonist around whom the life of Balidatta, the male protagonist moves, along with the way the fiction works. Similarly, in *Petals of Blood*, Ngugi unravels the character of Wanja, a bar-maid-a body seller around whom many lives revolve making her the virtual heroine. Ngugi also talks about alternatives-religion i.e Christianity-or rebellion on the principles of Marxism. Similarly, Achebe is concerned with these issues, making Beatrice, a virtual “surrogate novelist,” and is anxious to know how an “embittered history” of a people could be appeased. This paper seeks to discuss the issues revolving around the ‘embittered’ and ‘alienated’



history of a country in terms of power-equations and power politics and the role of a writer in a third-world country. The novel represents ‘a canonical voice inscribed in the anti-imperialist discourse of the Third-world writing, which is still struggling to rewrite self in the process of decolonization.’

Surely *Survivor* opens dramatically with the Memsahib asking Balidatta to pick up ‘Pig Manure’- a taboo for a Hindu. Achebe’s novel also has a dramatic start with Samson, the dictator, in tantrums and chiding his Cabinet Ministers for lack of vigilance on their part about the security of the state. It “opens with the military ruler of the African state of Kangan disdainfully treating his civilian Cabinet like children.” Like *Petals of Blood*, *Anthills of the Savannah* and *Survivor*, have multiple protagonists and the events are superimposed through these set of protagonists. Going back to the three novels, we can straight away feel how the female protagonists, be it Wanja or Beatrice or Sarojini hold crucial sway on the turn of events. For instance when we take Beatrice, she comes out as one who symbolizes savannahs by its foliage, a symbol of fertility and greenery akin to Sarojini who is a survivor like Wanja amidst the pastorals as we see:

this is one of the most brilliant daughters of this country. Beatrice Okoh. She is a Senior Assistant Secretary in the Ministry of Finance — the only person in the service, male or female, with a first class honours in English. And not from a local University but from Queen Mary College, University of London. . . . We are proud of her. (75)

Her name at baptism is “Nwanyibuife — a female is also something.” (87) Her birth is not marked by gaiety or enthusiasm as she happened to be a fifth girl in a row. That the fifth issue should also turn out to be a girl disappointed her parents, her mother in particular.

Like Sarojini and Wanja, Beatrice is very sensitive, shrewd and capable of visualising the course of events to happen. She also earns the image of ‘a priestess’ and goddess’ by Ikem and Chris respectively. But she prefers the image of ‘prophetess-cum-priestess’ like Chielo in *Things Fall Apart*. According to David Carroll, “she is the most ambitious creation in the novel” and she combines in herself “both the worlds of modern politics and ...ancient myth;” This synergy leaves a mark on our minds-of a post colonial white female.

Like her fellow “been-tos,” Beatrice is also alienated from her roots, traditions, native myths and legends. But she is restored to all these following her humiliation and she finds them not worse than the civilian misrule. The continual pursuit of power without scruples spells disaster to the people who, shorn of all civil liberties, become its worst victims. The untold suffering and misery inflicted on the people throws up leaders like Ikem, Chris and Beatrice who rise in revolt against the tyrannous establishment. They sow the seeds of courage and fortitude in the masses to stand up against the new oppressors. Ikem and Chris face persecution and are eventually liquidated. But they never gave up the struggle. In the

fable of the tortoise and the leopard, the tortoise insists on leaving behind the traces of its struggle before getting killed. The likes of Ikem would rather die struggling against the foe than meekly submit to him — preferring death to defeat.

Struggle is the watchword and the precious legacy they leave to posterity. The awakening in the people's consciousness aroused by these martyrs is the only insurance against despotic regimes and their sycophantic cliques.

Achebe does not subscribe to grandiose ideologies either of the left or the right. He denounces regimented policies pursued by the ruling coteries of either party which inevitably degenerates into intrigues and maneuvering of power politics. Achebe observes: "Orthodoxy whether of the right or the left is the graveyard of creativity." (100) It would be illusory to think that a millennium will dawn one fine day upon humanity ensuring the supremacy of freedom and happiness for everyone, once and for all.

According to Achebe, "Experience and intelligence warn us that man's progress in freedom will be piece meal, slow and undramatic." (99) One has always to strive and struggle, be ever vigilant against new forms of slavery for the creation of a better man and a better society. Beatrice represents the new awakened woman who is a reservoir of great strength and fortitude. She would be companion in arms to man in this continual historic struggle, so are Ngugi's Wanja and Mohanty's Sarojini. Amazingly Beatrice of Achebe and Ngugi's Wanja lose their male compatriots from various angles like Mohanty's Sarojini who wanted to be her man's companion in rising up in life. She loses Balidatta in his quest for power as he finds suddenly the hot blood of power rushed to his head.

In *Survivor*, Sarojini gets sandwiched between two identities one beckoning her to the future dream of more wealth, more power and more comfort and the other betraying the futility of it all. Her ambivalence is the sign of a dilemma. The centre has to come apart of which she is a mere part.

In the complex relationship between Balidatta and Sarojini, Mohanty's attempt has been to display the unusual situations leading to breakdown of their relationship. Balidatta behaves like a helpless child whom Sarojini looks after, consoles, and supports. Apart from their common craving for wealth, power, home, car, cash, social status etc Sarojini has other expectations from her husband as a wife which has remained unfulfilled. That sexual or biological unease in Sarojini has been illustrated here with some instances. How this unfulfilled desire gradually leads her on the path of promiscuity creating the greatest unease has been beautifully delineated by Mohanty.

There was both a sister's affection and a mother's tenderness in the care she lavished on her frail husband. But at other times, she grew restless. While Balidatta snored, exhausted from the day's work and the endless weaving of plans, she would lie awake- quivering, burning, lashed by storms. She would fall asleep at last and wake to another day of



domesticity". (14)

Mohanty, Achebe and Ngugi could unravel a discord in an accord and an accord in a discord, as Mohanty shows how the music of the flute had been the reason of discord for both Balidatta and Sarojini. Balidatta considers this flute unusual and unnecessary in a world of survival. In the vocabulary of the Company words like factory, workers, production, fatigue are paramount. But where is the place of art, music and painting which arouses subtle feelings? That is the restlessness he faces at hearing the flute. He also observes that the melancholy of the music instilled by the young man and the melancholy in the Sarojini's state, are the two sides of one coin. That scene of flute playing troubled him deeply. "The unusual relationship between Balidatta and Sarojini, Sharma and Ranjit Babu, Venkat Rao and his wife and many others in the great twilight world of a town without values and permanencies" (Mahapatra Introduction to *The Survivor*).

That is the real story of the novel. There is an impasse in each pair creating unease at different levels. That is the essence of the novel.

Coming back to *Survivor*, throughout the novel, even as Balidatta rises in company, he is never a happy person. Something is lacking, something always eludes him like a distant cloud. Dreams and visions pass away, the heart remains ever dried up, waiting for the rains. Sarojini is necessary for the rise to the room at the top but he cannot reconcile himself to the irony of life and anger wells up within him when Sharma and Ranjit Babu ask her to eat a little more or cast hungry looks at her. Slowly something snaps between Balidatta and Sarojini. To the end of the novel we see the tired Balidatta returning home only to be told that Sarojini has just gone out somewhere with "one of those Babus", and then he calls the steno and his chaprasi to begin work on yet another file and seek refuge in his familiar world of meaningless words. To Mohanty, the idea of survival is to keep away the nightmare of bankruptcy. We learn to be survivors with the "horrors crouched beneath your pillow. Profit and loss. The ant-hill grew, fed on human flesh; the figures in the bank multiplied." (P 143)

Gopinath Mohanty's prose has qualities of poetry. It incorporates lyricism, vibrant folk-idiom and delicate symbolism within its structure. It is not easy to recapture the lyricism and richness of folk-idiom in English.

Ngugi's *Petals of Blood* is also a committed novel and it addresses itself to the politics of revolution and a socialist programme, while *A Grain of Wheat* focuses its attention on the vital issues plaguing the nation at the time of independence of Kenya in 1963, *Petals of Blood* seeks to survey the unpleasant events of the neo-colonial scenario of the country between 1963 and 1975.

According to Bernth Lindfors, *Petals of Blood* is "Africa's first proletarian popular novel." Chidi Amuta looks at it as "a classic of epic proportions in the emergent tradition of anti-imperialist literature in Africa" and Ngugi is concerned in the novel with his "search for socialist alternatives." Indeed, all such critical appraisals of the novel are apt and appropriate. But the novel is much more than this. It has yet another important dimension which needs to be explored in much greater depth than what has been attempted so far. What Ngugi does in

this novel is to work out his strategy through a religious framework in spite of his mistrust and contempt for Christianity as an organised establishment. The approach of the novelist is synthetic and multidimensional. He seems to be of the view that at the ultimate level both religion and socialism meet and mix. In a vital sense, the novel could be interpreted as a study in religion and rebellion.

The novelist's quest for a world, a new idealized world free from greed and competitive accumulation appears to be Utopian at one level and also attainable at another. The scope of the novel has provision for people's liberation struggles on the one hand and a sense of faith in 'fate,' "destiny," 'the will of God' and so on and so forth. The politics of neocolonialism in the form 'of multi-nationals and the comprador bourgeoisie; the issues arising out of religion and rebellion, constitute an important matrix of the novel. The thematic principle of the novel also seeks to deal with the law of God, the law of the state, and the socialistic goals. *Petals of Blood* is also remarkable for its reiteration of protagonism. The well-evolved concept of protagonism as discernible in *A Grain of Wheat* finds its most mature manifestation in *Petals of Blood*. In this novel of multiple protagonists, there is not one single hero who could be termed complete or central — without the necessary and complementary roles of other protagonists. Ngugi invests the marginal people with streaks of heroism, thereby emphasising that the true saviours are liberators or are the people themselves in their collective wisdom and might.

Achebe's *Anthills* is a serious indictment of military regimes which become leader-centred and eventually and develop into life presidencies. The novelist no longer remains a historian but transforms into an ideologue. He is not merely evaluating, but clearly censuring certain developments in Africa in the last two decades. He even suggests positive values to replace the old ones. He offers an updated comprehensive critical statement on the comprehensive political situations explicitly showing that any form of government which is insensitive to the needs of the suffering masses is doomed to fail. The novel offers a critical evaluation of the existing power structures in Africa, which are largely a legacy of their colonial past and rejects their obsessive drive towards centralisation. Power is the central thematic motif in the text and what is of vital importance to Achebe is attitudes to power held by different classes of society.

"Power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely" is an adage which holds good to any system or arrangement. Achebe's major preoccupation in *Anthills* appears to be the issue of power and problems arising out of it. He deals with the phenomenon of power by taking recourse to an Igbo myth according to which

"In the beginning Power rampaged through our world, naked. So the Almighty, looking at his creation through the round undying eye of the Sun, saw and pondered and finally decided to send his daughter, Idemili, to bear witness to the moral nature of authority by wrapping around Power's rude waist a loincloth of peace and modesty."(102)

Achebe reiterates that power needs to be checked, restrained and resisted lest it tramples and crushes the very principles of liberty, freedom and human dignity. Yet another



significant Igbo belief which influences Achebe's sensibility is the concept of "the duality of things." He asserts: Where something stands, there also something else will stand. The novelist rejects and dismisses the concept of "absolutes" as applicable to the political structures.

As the commonality of Beatrice (*Anthills of Savannah*), Sarojini (*Survivor*) and Wanja (*Petals of Blood*) is referred to already, Wanja is invested with a fiercely feminine and aggressively individualistic personality unlike Beatrice or Sarojini. 'She belongs to that remarkable breed of Ngugi women — Mwihaki, Nyambura, Muthoni, Mumbi, Wambuku — all of them brave, resilient, resourceful and determined', says Eustace Palmer. According to Chidi Amuta, "Wanja is a typical Ngugi woman, elan vital combining great adaptive skills with dynamism, enterprise and forbearance." Commenting on the role and place of women in Ngugi's fiction, Jennifer Evans observes: "In Ngugi's novels women are shown to have a fundamental role in the struggle against oppression and exploitation, and often courage and hope are ultimately found in their hands." Wanja, thus, belongs to 'the strong breed of Ngugi women' in the throes of a social change.

This is the bourgeoisie connect that all the three writers on the lines of Fanon who speaks of the narcissism of the expositors after independence whose innermost vocation seems to be to keep in running and to be part of the racket...a racket to ransack the economy, ethics, emotions and ethnicity of the masses.

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