Proceedings of The Academic Conference of African Scholar Publications & Research International on Challenge and Prospects Vol. 8 No. 3. 10th December, 2015 – Bauchi State University, Gadau, University Assembly Hall, Main Campus, Itsa-Gadau, Bauchi State.

POSTCOLONIAL FEMINISM IN ANTHILLS OF THE SAVANNAH

IJAH GIDEON AKASE, PHD
Department of French, Nasarawa State University, Keffi, Nasarawa State, Nigeria

Abstract
Chinua Achebe's ***Anthills of the Savannah*** *and Yvonne Vera's* ***Nehanda****, though separated by country, culture, style, topic and gender of the author, both deal in differing ways with the question of the restoration of women in postcolonial visions of Africa's past, present and future. Both novels present strong, central female characters who serve as sources of passion and inspiration, though Achebe's Beatrice and Vera's Nehanda are extremely different. Although both author's are clearly interested in rethinking women's roles in their respective countries, their individual styles and histories suggest clearly delineated goals for their presentations. These differences raise numerous questions regarding intention, location, and successful interpretation of postcolonial feminist theory. They also frame their narratives in such a way that they begin to highlight the essential relationship between the postcolonial independence and gender equality.*

Introduction
One of the fundamental tenets of recent postcolonial theory is that among the first necessary steps in newfound colonial independence is the reclamation of the previously disparaged and disrespected culture. This project, called the cultural nationalist phase by Frantz Fanon, and referred to by Kirsten Holst Petersen as the "service of dignifying the past and restoring African self-confidence" (Petersen, **Postcolonial Reader**: 253), carries with it some dubious baggage. An apparently necessary result of the glorification of pre-colonial culture is the acceptance of, or refusal to deal with, inherent issues of gender inequality or abuse within the society. Petersen suggests such is the case because "the African past was not made the object of critical scrutiny the way the past tends to be in societies with a more harmonious development, it was made the object of a quest" (253). She goes on to argue the unfortunate result, that "the picture of women's place and role in these societies had to support this quest and was consequently lent more dignity and described in more positive terms than reality warranted" (253). With the passing of time since independence, authors have begun to turn their eyes to the more harsh realities of

the present and, by doing so, attempted to discuss a dialogue about the issue of women in African society. Achebe and Vera's writing are both modern works, each written within the last ten years. One approaching these books with an eye towards trends in postcolonial theory could be afforded the assumption that they were written with an awareness of this need for a new, more consistent and realistic vision of women in Africa. It is with this knowledge, however, that the disparity of mission within these two novels and, apparently, behind these two novels becomes all the more striking.

Postcolonial Feminism in the Anthills of the Savannah

Achebe's personal role in the world of theory is more clearly defined, perhaps primarily because of the length of time that he has been writing. The span of his work bridges the difficult gap between the grappling assertion for dignity of the early days of independence to the more tenuous and complicated present. Petersen, fueled by the strength of her previously noted argument, looks with particular criticism at Achebe's earlier work:

Achebe's much praised objectivity with regard to the merits and flaws of traditional Ibo society becomes less than praiseworthy seen in this light: his traditional women are happy, harmonious members of the community, even when they are repeatedly beaten and barred from any say in the communal decision making process and constantly reviled in sayings and proverbs . . . The obvious inequality of the sexes seems to be the subject of mild amusement for Achebe (253-254).

It would seem then, that this critical precedent weighed on Achebe's mind when he began **Anthills of the Savannah** in the late eighties, since it functions as a reconsideration of his past writing, a bold attempt to grapple with the charges levied at him by Petersen and her fellow critics. The novel, centered on the involvement of three old friends with the management of a fictional African state called Kangan, deals on a variety of levels (some, would could infer, quite personal) with Achebe's understanding of women's roles in a postcolonial nation. The novel works particularly well, in fact, when considered as the continuation of a thought begun in Achebe's previous work.

The political history of Kangan in **Anthills of the Savannah** is essentially the history of three male friends. These Western-educated men have, in their own minds, risen to a level above most of the bedraggled and suffering population, yet they are doomed to fail due to their insistence on attempting to run the country according to preexisting patterns; the country's turmoil is their own. In the midst of this is Beatrice, the woman who emerges as the true spirit and heart of the novel. Removed from the inner-workings of the men's government, she alone is able to observe the status of Kangan with a perspective more geared towards reality. As she tells Chris, " 'all three of you are incredibly conceited. The

story of this country, as far as you are concerned, is the story of the three of you'" (Achebe: 60). What comes to pass in the novel suggests that Achebe's argument is quite similar to that of his countryman, Ken Saro-Wiwa: that Africa's problems do not exist solely in the more tribal villages. Rather, Achebe seems to argue, modes of failure are doomed to repeat themselves in African societies, "been-to" or no. As long as proposed solutions adhere solely to Western ideas of advancement or success, nothing can be achieved-- in the words of Audre Lord regarding feminism, it is impossible to use the master's tools to dismantle his house. As Ikem (Achebe's alter-ego within the text) argues, "the real danger today is . . . from all those virulent, misshapen freaks like Amin and Bokassa sired on Africa by Europe" (47). He is cognizant of the danger, yet is unable to locate and remove himself from just such a cycle. Raised by Europe and placed in control of the supposedly independent nation, men such as Chris, Sam and Ikem unwittingly repeat themes of colonialism, as Ikem muses after some harsh thoughts, "the very words the white master had said in his time about the black race as a whole. Now we say them about the poor" (37). Achebe's arguments here are made even more interesting when one realizes that they are quite similar to essays on postcolonial feminist theory and the correct way to resolve issues of gender inequality in Africa.

The turning point in the novel is Ikem's realization about his prior mistakes regarding women. Though he had promoted liberal philosophy and attitude towards women, even writing rather reverently of the women's uprising of 1929, Beatrice repeatedly had accused him of having "no clear role for women in his political thinking" (83). The problem, he comes to realize in the course of **Anthills of the Savannah**, stems from his discovery of inherent sexism within African culture -- he realizes that, though there is no Eve parable as in Western myth, the sanctification of women through the idea of a supreme mother, one who is somehow removed, also functions as an attempt to separate women from the matters of everyday life. The truth, he argues, is necessarily messier, "there is no universal conglomerate of the oppressed" (90). Each situation deserves its own unique attempt at a solution. By realizing what he does about the status of women in the world (a point that resounds through the majority of postcolonial feminist theory, that universal sisterhood is essentially a falsehood, each of the world's cultures has its own visions of femininity), Ikem comes to a greater understanding about the fate of Africa as well: "society is an extension of the individual. The most we can hope to do with a problematic individual psyche is to re-form it. No responsible psychoanalyst would aim to do more" (91). Ikem, and therefore Achebe's, potential sexism is his own, not to be considered a Western attribute like his suits and language. And this African sexism deserves an African response. A response that is made clearer by Achebe through his conclusion, a conclusion in which only the women remain.

Faced with a naming ceremony for the now-deceased Ikem's daughter, Beatrice insists on performing it themselves: " 'In our traditional society . . . the father named the child. But the man who should have done it today is absent . . . I think our tradition is faulty there. It is really safest to ask the mother what her child should be called'" (206). This breaking with tradition suggests a new beginning, a subverting of not only Western tradition, but African as well. Beatrice leads the change, forcing the others to adapt with what is present. Achebe appears to have seen the fault of his previous opinions, realizing the need for women declare their own place in African society, if it is ever to heal itself and progress onwards. He appears to cede whatever control over popular opinion he may have been viewed as having through the old man's words at the end of the novel, "'in you young people our world has met its match. Yes! You have put the world where it should sit'" (210).

One of the clearest and strongest similarities between **Anthills of the Savannah** and Yvonne Vera's **Nehanda** is that Beatrice and Nehanda both serve as sources of passion and inspiration to the men around them, and they both, in varying ways, help to rewrite or adapt their cultures for the future. A strong question as to intention is raised, however, by the differing manners in which they are presented. Though both provide spiritual leadership, Nehanda's role is primarily symbolic, while Achebe takes great pains to present Beatrice as an individual. This may, in fact, be a result of the writing styles of the two authors. **Nehanda** is written in a non-realistic, poetic fashion that perhaps lends itself to a more symbolic interpretation than does Achebe's text.

Nehanda is born, at the beginning of the novel, into a world in which only women are permitted: the birth-hut. Although she is named by her father, her early years seem steeped "in rituals that excluded the men" (Vera: 20). From her birth, Nehanda's people all recognize her as special, as a person imbued with great importance. Her strength is truly shown when the white men begin to threaten the tribal people of Zimbabwe. She is transformed into a spiritual leader, the guide and heart of the resistance, and her eyes "are filled with prophecies" (80). She seems to possess a true vision of the future when she tells her people that " 'the tradition of the white man will destroy us'" (81), yet what immediately follows is troubling: "Nehanda speaks as she gives guns to the people" (81). Instead of seeking to avoid the future, Nehanda appears to fulfill it by instructing her people to take up the guns, the technological tradition of the white man. This scene from the book seems to run clearly against the theoretical instructions of Lord, yet it also hints at a genuine ability or realization of the need to adapt in some way to the future. The ambiguity of this passage is once again magnified by the style of the novel, yet it also appears intentional, as if Vera is asking the same questions of her protagonist.

The character of Nehanda herself, when looked at from a postcolonial feminist perspective, appears to be quite problematic. Her stature within the precolonial society is entirely valid, but dependent on her doubled otherness-- she is both a woman (representing the mysterious mother figure) and a spiritually connected prophet. The respect afforded to her seems inseparable from her bizarre silences, rituals, and prophecies. Mr. Browning, the superior of the two white officers in the novel, doubts that Nehanda, as a woman, could actually have any sway over her people, saying " 'I doubt that the natives can listen to an old woman like her. What can she tell them? This society has no respect for women, whom they treat like children. A woman has nothing to say in the life of the natives'" (75). All of this appears to be true of precolonial Zimbabwe, yet Nehanda's otherness guarantees her listeners, creating at the same time an almost paradoxical obedience/fear of powerful women that can even be seen in **Anthills of the Savannah**, a text that is set decades later and miles apart from **Nehanda**. In that novel, in the midst of a fight, Chris is only stymied by Beatrice when she attempts to break out of the Western-tinged, respectful relationship. When confronted with this new opposition, he responds, " 'I don't know what has come over you. Screaming at me like some Cherubim and Seraphim prophetess or something . . . I don't understand'" (Achebe: 103).
Both **Anthills of the Savannah** and **Nehanda** are texts that seek to restore women in African society, one dealing with visions and perceptions of the past and one of the future. In the former book, Achebe is clearly dealing with his own visions of Nigerian society, but Vera's goals are not nearly as apparent. Her novel could be read as an attempt to legitimize a ravaged culture, the same sort of dignification argued by Petersen. However in a published interview, Vera states that there is no exact historical accuracy in her frequent examples of culture and cultural ritual-- she made most of it up. So her issue, then, is one of feminism. Yet Nehanda's role in this remains unclear. Is she Ikem's mistaken vision of women, a woman so respected that she is othered out of relevance? Or is she a bold example of the inextricable bond that exists between the African feminist battle for equality and the African battle against colonialism? No easy answers to this question are provided within the text, however as the book ends, the "chasm between the living and the dead is broken" (Vera: 118), hinting at the potential rebirth of Nehanda and her struggle. The same aura of circuity runs through **Anthills of the Savannah**. The gender issues that exist within Africa, like the issues of colonialism, clearly cannot be solved with the same old solutions. Without new things, a cycle of failure is doomed to repeat. In the words of Trinh T. Minh-Ha: "Words empty out with age. Die and rise again, accordingly invested with new meaning, and always equipped with a secondhand memory" (Minh-Ha, **Postcolonial Reader**: 264). Likewise, the past is not forgotten in these African novels, it is only reinterpreted.

WORKS-CITED

Achebe, Chinua. Anthills of the Savannah. London: Heinemann, 1988.

---.*Things Fall Apart*. London, Heinemann Educational Books, 1958.

Audi, Robert, (ed). *The Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy*. Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Allen, Robert *Chambers Encyclopedic English Dictionary* Edinburgh. Chambers, 1994.

Achufusi, G. I. "Female Individuality and Assertiveness in the Novels of Ifeoma Okoye" in *Feminism in African Literature* ed. Helen Chukwuma, Enugu, New Generation Books, 1994.

Chinweizu *Anatomy of female power*. Lagos, Pero Press, 1990.

Dukor, Maduabuchi "How Not to Empower Women" in *Philosophyand Politics* ed, Madubuchi Dukor Lagos, OOP, 1998.

Frantz Fanon. The cultural nationalist as contained in ''Wretched of the Earth''. Pelican publishers, 1959.

Ndiokwere Nathaniel *Search for Greener Pastures*: *Igbo and African Experience*, Nebraska, Morris Publishing, 1998.

Kirkpatrick, Betty ed. *Rogets Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases* London, Penguin Books, 1987 edition

Kirsten Holst Petersen. Postcolonial Reader. Cited in 'Postimperial & Postcolonial literature in English'. Postcolonial Web publishers, 2002.

Ozumba, G. O. "Methodology and African Philosophy" in *Footmark on African Philosophy* ed. A.F Udiugwomen, Lagos, OOP, 1995.

Uwalaka Jude. *The Struggle for an Inclusive Nigeria*: *Igbo's: to be or not to be*. Enugu, SNAAP Press Ltd, 2003.

Yvonne, Vera. Nehanda. Tsar publications,1994.