



Gender and Power in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Abstract

*Chinua Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah presents a powerful exploration of gender and power in postcolonial Africa. Unlike his earlier works that center male protagonists, this novel gives significant space to female voices, especially through the character of Beatrice, who emerges as a symbol of strength, intelligence, and resilience. Set in the fictional West African country of Kangan, the novel depicts a military dictatorship where power is centralized, abused, and highly gendered. While men like Sam (His Excellency) dominate the political landscape through violence and control, Achebe introduces Beatrice as a counterforce—a woman who challenges patriarchal authority and participates actively in the intellectual and political life of her society. This article examines how gender roles are constructed, contested, and transformed in the novel. Achebe uses Beatrice not only to critique the male-dominated political systems but also to suggest a new vision of inclusive leadership rooted in empathy and shared responsibility. The novel highlights how female voices, though often silenced, possess the potential to question oppression and offer alternatives to authoritarian rule. In a society marked by fear and silence, Beatrice's courage and wisdom become a beacon of hope for democratic change. This study argues that Achebe, through *Anthills of the Savannah*, moves beyond traditional portrayals and gives a central role to gender in the discussion of power, politics, and nationhood.*

Keywords: gender, power, patriarchy, leadership

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In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Chinua Achebe shifts his narrative lens to a postcolonial African nation, Kangan, where political instability, military dictatorship, and gender imbalances converge. The novel focuses on three male friends: Sam (His Excellency), the military ruler; Chris Oriko, the Commissioner for Information; and Ikem Osodi, a journalist and editor. However, it is Beatrice, a senior civil servant and the girlfriend of Chris, who rises as the moral and intellectual center of the novel. Achebe uses Beatrice's voice to question patriarchal power and to propose a new model of leadership that is inclusive, thoughtful, and human-centered.

Beatrice is a powerful counterpoint to the male characters in the novel. Educated, articulate, and emotionally intelligent, she challenges the norms of a society that sees leadership as a male preserve. In contrast to the self-important and often insecure men around her, Beatrice is calm and reflective. Achebe presents her as a woman who understands the failures of male leadership and who offers a different kind of power—one rooted in dialogue, empathy, and care.

Her role becomes even more prominent after the assassination of Chris. At this point, Beatrice steps forward to conduct a naming ceremony for a newborn baby, invoking traditional Igbo customs. This act is symbolic: it shows her ability to merge



tradition with modern values and to reclaim the voice of women in shaping society. Beatrice's involvement in this ritual signals the restoration of balance in a broken society. Achebe's decision to end the novel with a woman performing a traditionally male role is a bold statement about the future of leadership in Africa.

Sam, known as His Excellency, is a product of the postcolonial crisis of leadership. Although he was once a promising young man, his position as a military dictator transforms him into a tyrant who fears opposition and clings to power through violence and intimidation. His rule is marked by paranoia, betrayal, and a deep need to assert dominance. Achebe uses Sam to show how power, when concentrated in the hands of one man, can corrupt and destroy.

The masculine ego is central to Sam's leadership style. He dismisses women and treats them as objects. In one scene, he insists that Beatrice accompany him to a party as a form of display, which she resists. This confrontation exposes how power and gender intersect in the politics of visibility and control. Beatrice's refusal to be objectified is a moment of resistance, and Achebe presents it as a courageous act in a male-dominated world.

Ikem Osodi, the editor of the national newspaper and a fierce critic of the regime, undergoes a transformation in his views on gender. Initially, he holds traditional beliefs about women, but his interactions with Beatrice and others lead him to reconsider his stance. Achebe uses Ikem's character to show that gender consciousness can be developed.

In one of his speeches, Ikem acknowledges the importance of women in society, stating that "true power lies in giving life, not taking it." This shift marks a significant moment in the novel. It shows that change is possible, even within patriarchal systems. Ikem's death, like Chris's, is tragic, but his intellectual growth adds depth to the novel's feminist theme.

Towards the end of the novel, Achebe emphasizes the importance of female solidarity. Beatrice gathers with women from different backgrounds, including Elewa, Ikem's girlfriend, and

other women from her community. Together, they share stories, perform rituals, and express their grief. This gathering becomes a political space where healing, resistance, and vision for the future are born.

Achebe uses this moment to suggest that women, often sidelined in political discussions, hold the key to a more humane and inclusive society. The naming ceremony, conducted by Beatrice, becomes a metaphor for rebirth—not just of a child, but of a nation. It symbolizes hope, continuity, and the emergence of a new model of leadership that values life, dialogue, and community.

Achebe moves beyond the typical narrative of political failure and explores how women can play a crucial role in the reconstruction of society. He does not romanticize female characters, but he portrays them as strong, intelligent, and capable of leading. In Beatrice, Achebe offers a vision of leadership that is ethical and inclusive.

The novel critiques the limitations of male-centered politics and proposes a gender-inclusive future. By placing Beatrice at the center of the final scenes, Achebe suggests that the future of Africa must involve the participation of women in all spheres of life. This vision is not only literary but also political. It calls for a shift in how we think about power, leadership, and gender roles in postcolonial societies.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Chinua Achebe presents a compelling examination of gender and power in a society grappling with the aftermath of colonialism and the challenges of self-rule. Through Beatrice, he introduces a female voice that stands firm in the face of oppression and offers a new way of imagining leadership. The novel critiques patriarchal power while uplifting female agency, solidarity, and wisdom. Achebe's portrayal of gender dynamics shows that true power lies not in domination, but in inclusion, empathy, and the courage to imagine a different world. As such, *Anthills of the Savannah* is not only a political novel but also a feminist one that redefines the role of women in shaping the destiny of a nation.



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