Writing Protest Obliquely: Articulating the Burden of a Nation in Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*  
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**Introduction**

When examining a sub-category of literature such as protest literature, it is easy to forget the fact that such categorisation often tends to over-stress the distinctions that supposedly obtain between it and other sub-categories. As Irving Howe rightly observes, ‘we are hardly speaking of genres at all when we employ such loose terms as the political or psychological novel, since these do not mark any fundamental distinctions of literary form’.

In order to properly situate categorisations like these, it must first be realised that the differences which establish them are actually more subtle than they first appear to be.

In his foreword to *American Protest Literature*, John Stauffer states:

> I define protest literature broadly to mean the uses of language to transform the self and change society. By language I refer not only to words, but to visual art, music, and film. Protest literature functions as a catalyst, guide or mirror of social change. It not only critiques some aspect of society, but also suggests, either implicitly or explicitly, a solution to society’s ills.

Protest literature may be defined as a sub-category of literature in which the works espouse protest explicitly, either as a major theme, a recurring motif, an overarching metaphor, or as a structuring device. It is a literature which is characterised by the existence of a clearly-defined viewpoint, strong moral convictions, an often-strident tone, a pronounced sense of outrage, a clear perception of the issues at stake, and a usually optimistic belief in the ultimate triumph of justice.

Protest literature does not necessarily utilise techniques which are radically different from those of other categories of literature. However, they often combine such techniques in such a way as to produce effects that are peculiar to the sub-category. The techniques might include a strong emphasis on realism, the use of defamiliarisation strategies, the liberal deployment of satire, irony and paradox, the utilisation of anti-heroic characters, as well as unique methods of plot construction, structure and narrative perspective. Its effects can include pity, anger, disgust and awareness.

Because the main aim of protest literature is that of increasing the awareness of the audience, many works within this sub-category use techniques of demystification that are designed to unsettle long-held assumptions and attitudes in the audience. As identified by the Russian formalist critic Victor Shklovsky, such techniques are grounded upon the capacity of art to delimit reality by disrupting the ‘automatism of perception in several ways. Some protest writers use the technique of ‘seeing things out of their normal context’; others deploy unexpected symbols and

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imagery, and the use of archaisms or dialect forms in the language of poetry. Bertolt Brecht’s alienation theory of alienation effect, in which he tried to deny his audience the usual immersion in and identification with what was being enacted, is also used by writers of protest literature.

Ideology is of particular importance in protest literature. The strong standpoints that are prominent in protest literature are often enhanced by the espousal of ideological viewpoints. Marxism and socialism in particular have significantly informed the radical outlook of many works of protest literature. Ideology helps protest writers to offer a coherent understanding of the issues they portray, and enables them to combine such understanding with a clear vision of the way in which they can be effectively resolved. However, there is sometimes a tendency to subordinate all aspects of particular social conditions to the dictates of the preferred ideology, even where they are not seen to be completely appropriate. Some protest writers may not espouse a particular ideology, preferring instead to work in a tradition of liberal humanism whose focus is more on the moral dimensions of the issues rather than the furtherance of a specific political agenda. The advantage of this approach is that it avoids the pitfalls of political ideology and can therefore be more closely attuned to the peculiarities of specific issues. On the other hand, such approaches may lack the clear focus and comprehensiveness of an outlook that characterises more ideological approaches.

One of the ways in which protest literature can be understood is by assessing its aims, its features and its techniques. Regardless of differences of culture, time and place, all protest literature seeks a three-fold objective: to testify, to indict and to seek redress. In testifying, protest literature consciously aims to remember and commemorate acts of injustice perpetrated against particular persons or groups. The act of remembering to honour those who suffered, celebrates those who endured, and enables future generations to have a proper understanding of their roots. The act of indictment is a central purpose of protest literature, and in doing so, it exposes those implicated in acts of oppression and injustice, identifies, analyses and characterises the acts of oppression of which they are guilty, as well as outlining the social, political and economic factors which facilitate such oppression. It is a crucial aspect of the goals of protest literature to symbolically and literally ‘name’ injustice and its perpetrators so that they stand condemned by all right-thinking people. In seeking redress, protest literature seeks to end the injustices it portrays, as well as the punishment of perpetrators and the provision of restitution to the victims. Such restitution is often physical and psychological because it seeks to comprehensively repair the damage inflicted upon individuals, institutions and society as a whole over a sustained period of time.

This essay examines how Achebe, in furtherance of his desire to reconfigure the very notion of protest in Anthills of the Savannah, dismisses the tactic of overt protest as a blunt instrument likely to do as much harm as good, and chooses oblique and indirect forms of protest which seek to achieve the same ends in a more subtle manner. The essay will further evaluate the various techniques adopted to illustrate

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protest by Achebe in the novel. The essay establishes that the very techniques being discussed in the novel represent an important aspect of Achebe’s indirect strategy, as can be seen in their non-conventional approach to the portrayal of germane social issues. In addition to them, however, there are ways in which Achebe specifically undertakes to carry out indirect forms of protest in the novel. Achebe in *Anthills of the Savannah* prefers a deep ethical change in society in place of a revolutionary political transformation by avoiding the adoption of a particular political system as a means of resolving social issues for several reasons: a desire to avoid lapsing into propaganda, a belief that ideological rigidity hinders rather than facilitates the resolution of social ills, and a lack of faith in the viability of the more radical ideologies to achieve social, political and economic advancement. He demonstrated this when he satirised the radical ideology, as underscored by Ikem Osodi’s condemnation of the exuberance of trade unionism in his speech at the Bassa University.\(^5\)

*Anthills of the Savannah* satirises military dictatorship and its attendant aberrations in post-colonial Africa. The novel has its setting in a fictional country called Kangan, which is undoubtedly Nigeria. *Anthills of the Savannah* depicts his Excellency, Sam, a Sandhurst trained soldier who is the Head of State of Kangan Republic, as power drunk and insensitive to the social and political needs of the people of Kangan. The novel focuses on the tragedy of dictatorship and misrule typified by Sam’s military administration as narrated by the three friends: Ikem, Chris and Beatrice who are also associates of Sam. The narratives of the trio underline failure of the military to provide good governance which could connect the rulers with the governed, but it rather brutalises and subjugates ‘the poor and dispossessed’ (141) of the Kangan republic. The novel opens with the dramatisation of the military authority’s intolerance for decorum in public sphere:

> You’re wasting everybody’s time, Mr. Commissioner for Information.  
> I will not go to Abazon. Finish! Kabisa! Any other business?  
> As your Excellency wishes. But ...  
> But me no buts, Mr. Oriko! The matter is closed, I said. (1)

The image of the military portrayed in the above exchange is that of arrogance and outright disregard for democratic governance ethos. This underscores the antithetical relationship between democracy and military rule as succinctly captured by Claude Ake,

> the military and democracy are in dialectical opposition ... The military demands submission, democracy enjoins participation; one is a tool of violence, the other a means of consensus building for peaceful co-existence.\(^6\)

Achebe’s unique approach to protest is shaped by his long-standing discomfort with conventional or insufficiently examined approaches to the delineation of social issues in literature. As Gikandi asserts, his ideological standpoints are characterised by a persistent unwillingness to follow the well-trodden path: ‘ideology as process and

\(^5\) Chinua Achebe, *Anthills of the Savanna* (Ibadan: Heinemann Educational Books, 1988) 153. Further references to this work will be included in parentheses in the text.  

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critique, rather than product and dogma, is the key to understanding Achebe’s narrative strategies.7

One of the most significant ways in which Achebe portrays oblique forms of protest in *Anthills of the Savannah* is by highlighting paradoxes which reside at the heart of protest. He shows that not all protest is protest, and conversely, that it is possible to protest without protesting. A prominent example of the former is the national cabinet whose obsequious protests are simply intended to maintain their positions of high office: His Excellency’s statement about returning to the barracks is ‘boldly interrupted by the Commissioner for Justice and the Attorney-General and then by everybody else with an assortment of protests’ (4-5). In his speech to the students at the University of Bassa, Ikem exposes a cross-section of social classes and professional groups whose ‘protests’ are in fact self-centred displays of greed and selfishness: corrupt civil servants, materialistic trade unionists and over-indulged students. When any of these groups wishes to protect its selfish interests, it calls such activities ‘protest’.

Unlike those groups, there are individuals who are able to engage in protest without actually appearing to be protesting. A prominent example of such is Mad Medico. A foul-mouthed Briton whose sanity is widely in doubt, his real name is John Kent. He is a hospital administrator who is notorious for bizarre acts which repeatedly get him into trouble with the authorities. Mad Medico ‘has a strange mania for graffiti’ (55) which he indulges by putting up signs that make offensive comments about ongoing situations. His graffiti somewhat appear to be protest, especially since they are often couched in terms that are designed to give maximum offence, both to those they are aimed at, as well as conventional notions of morality. Yet they are themselves borne out of moral outrage at the deficiencies of society, an outrage that is further underlined by the fact that Mad Medico is a foreigner, who ostensibly should not be as concerned about Kangan affairs as the indigenes.

Another example of protesting without appearing to protest can be seen at the end of the novel where a naming ceremony is conducted which defies all known traditional norms. A naming ceremony is traditionally conducted in Africa by the men folk, with the accompaniment of alcohol and kolanut. But its conduct in the novel is devoid of alcohol, kolanut, and the ceremony is coordinated by a woman, who gives the baby a male name. This ostensibly portends a protest against the excesses of male domination in a traditional African society, a protest against an unambiguous role accorded the menfolk by the traditional African cultural milieu. Taken together, the various components that make up this strange naming ceremony represent a comprehensive repudiation of the oppressiveness and injustice that have led to such widespread misery and suffering. Yet none of the participants believes they are doing anything extraordinary, much less engaging in protest of any sort. The true import of this action is pointed out by the old man who was supposed to do the naming: ‘in you young people our world has met its match. Yes! You have put the world where it should sit’ (27). Indeed, *Anthills of the Savannah* is full of people and groups who protest without appearing to do so. The novel is replete with taxi-drivers, house helps and other citizens of comparatively low social status who unconsciously express an unspoken opposition to the intolerable conditions under which they live, whether it is

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by battling for space in traffic jams, declining to work on Saturdays, or by displaying insights that are unknown to the supposedly better-educated elite. In fact, it is the educated elite who are the main target of such anti-protests because they seem to require shaking out of an incredible complacency which renders them blind, deaf and dumb to the terrible conditions all around them.

Adewale Maja-Pearce claims that *Anthills of the Savannah* does not seek an answer to why African governments such as that in charge of the Republic of Kangan treat their citizens with so much contempt, and why the citizens themselves actually seem to expect to be treated in such a high-handed manner, instead of resolutely opposing it:

If successive leaders are able to shirk their responsibilities and turn themselves into Life Presidents the better to brutalize the society further, it is only because the brutalized themselves collude in the endeavour.  

In a similar vein, Bernth Lindfors states that ‘one of the central questions raised in the course of the narrative – “What must a people do to appease an embittered history?” – remains unanswered’. Many of the novel’s characters, Maja-Pearce says, are guilty of a ‘naïve romanticism’ that they seem to think is a shortcoming to be found only in the so-called masses: Ikem and Beatrice, in particular, are guilty of making romantic analyses of the problems facing society. However, when *Anthills of the Savannah* is considered from the perspective of protest, it will be seen that what Maja-Pearce sees as romanticism is actually an aspect of the tortuous path these characters must follow as they gradually overcome deficiencies in their own personalities and come to realise the true nature of the problems confronting them, and the consequent need to protest strenuously against those deficiencies. In other words, it is one of the literary strategies adopted by Achebe in portraying protest in the novel.

**Community of Protest**

The paradoxes which shape protest in *Anthills of the Savannah* are further highlighted by the way in which Achebe ensures that no person or group has a monopoly on protest. This is done by portraying ways in which protesters are protested against. As has been earlier pointed out, the novel’s main characters all protest the state of their society, but they also protest against one another: Ikem protests what he sees as the arrogant behaviour of Chris; Chris protests Ikem’s apparent lack of regard for constituted authority; Beatrice protests Ikem’s patronising attitudes to women, as well as Mad Medico’s irreverent references to His Excellency. Even Captain Abdul Medani of the dreaded State Research Council protests the repressiveness of the state he is supposed to safeguard by alerting those it is hunting. Achebe seems to be saying that protest is so ubiquitous and multifaceted that nobody can claim to be more worthy of it than others. Instead of focusing on the people who protest, he prefers to emphasise the situations which trigger protest and investigate the peculiar

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10 Maja-Pearce 166.
combination of circumstance, personality and temperament that determine how individuals and groups respond to such situations.

**Reversing the Trajectory of Protest**

Related to this is Achebe’s strategy of revising the conventional trajectory of protest as outward-focused and targeted at others, to making it inward-focused, targeting oneself. He believes that all protest is founded on the individual’s own sense of right and wrong, and that the inner person is just as likely to be affected by protest as much as the external persons or groups it is ostensibly aimed at.

Like most writers in Africa, Achebe labours under the weight of huge popular expectations. It is widely believed that literary writings must offer practical solutions to social problems if they are to be considered relevant. Njabulo S. Ndebele states:

One accusation that has often been levelled at writers, particularly in those countries hungry for radical change, is that many of them have not offered solutions to the problems they may have graphically revealed. It seems … this accusation has been based on a set of premises by which the nature of the relationship between art and society could never be adequately disclosed. More often than not, the accusation has been presented on the demand that artists produce works that will incite people to political action, something which, most people will agree, is strictly speaking, the task of the professional propagandist.¹¹

The burden of relevance becomes even heavier when critics like Kemi Kuku argue that increasingly intractable difficulties in Nigerian society have caused the country’s authors to become overtly revolutionary in their work:

Recently, the Nigerian writer has assumed a new role which is that of a revolutionary. The social, political and economic situation has necessitated a more revolutionary approach to criticism. Having played the role of moralist, saviour and prophet of doom to no avail, the Nigerian writer has decided to initiate the direction towards which the people should move.¹²

It is clear that Kuku is talking about revolutions of the sort usually seen in Marxist rhetoric.

While it can be conceded that many Nigerian writers will have adapted their work to meet the new realities of the contemporary situation, it is doubtful that Achebe could be properly classified in such a ‘revolutionary’ group. He is interested in revolution, but it is more of a deep ethical change rather than a political transformation.

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, Achebe does this by conflating protest and moral or personal growth. Several characters are seen to experience increased psychological

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or emotional maturity as the novel progresses. Chris, Ikem and Beatrice are prime examples of this tendency. Although none of them is satisfied with what is going on in their country, they all remain within their comfort zones, content to complain about how things are not as they should be. Protest serves to take them into the new areas of experience which they must encounter in order to concretely act on the basis of their feelings and attitudes, and by so doing achieve emotional and psychological growth.

This process is particularly profound in Chris, whose increasing awareness and maturity Achebe is especially careful to chart. At the beginning of the novel, he is so emotionally removed from national affairs that he is virtually alienated. By his own admission, the main emotion that animates him is ‘Pure, unadulterated indifference’ (4). As the novel goes on, however, he is shaken out of this self-protective indifference by a series of incidents which leave him with no other choice than to openly protest the injustice and oppression he can no longer pretend not to see. His stance on contemporary affairs is repeatedly challenged by Ikem, Beatrice and Mad Medico, but the turning-point is the arbitrary suspension of Ikem. When he confronts His Excellency over the matter, it is obvious that his studied indifference has disappeared and has been replaced by a passionate intensity even he never knew he possessed. This is seen in the firmness with which he defies the Head of State: ‘Well, Your Excellency, for once I am turning you down. I will not carry out this instruction and I hereby tender my resignation’ (144). Ikem’s murder finally opens his eyes to the true nature of the regime he is serving and spurs him to outright defiance. As he flees Bassa, Chris finds himself in situations that continually remind him of how ignorant and unaware he had been before. He learns first-hand the paradox that ‘to be big man no hard but to be poor man no be small thing’ (194), as one of his helpers puts it; he is ‘stunned’ (200) by the unimpeachable logic that makes it impossible for him to use insecticide in a poor home where it is unknown. Ultimately, Chris is ‘fully reconciled to his new condition as a wide-eyed newcomer to the way of Kangan’ (201) because he understands that it is an essential part of the ‘transformation … of the man he was’ (204).

Ikem undergoes a similar process of change. Although it naturally differs from that of Chris in scope and intensity, it is still reflective of an increased emotional maturity that emerges in direct proportion to his capacity for protest. As the crusading editor of the leading national daily, the National Gazette, it appears that he already possesses all the necessary credentials to be a leading protest figure, but he recognises that he does not fully understand the problem, to say nothing of having all the answers. For example, he does not understand the popularity of public executions among the ordinary people, even though it is the very same people he claims to be fighting for. He wonders at the ‘insistence by the oppressed that his oppression be performed in style’ (139), and concludes that contradictions like these are ‘a basic human feeling that may only be alleviated by a good spread of general political experience’ (139).

Despite his sympathy and striving for analytical clarity, however, Ikem still has much to learn. For one thing, he is not as high-minded or enlightened as he likes to think. His wish to get rid of his girlfriend Elewa in the middle of the night because of his preference for being alone in his own bed betrays a selfishness that is at odds with his supposed sympathy for the downtrodden. His insistence on writing crusading editorials which have scored ‘many bull’s-eyes’ (38) is a silent demonstration of an

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intellectual arrogance that is often a weakness of socially-committed professionals. These shortcomings are exposed when Beatrice accuses him of a gender bias which is all the more chauvinistic because he is genuinely unaware of it. He is shocked when she tells him that ‘he has no clear role for women in his political thinking’ (91), relegating them to the well-worn role of passive lamenters of their deceased menfolk. This appears to mark a significant phase in his self-development because, as he tells Beatrice, ‘Your charge has forced me to sit down and contemplate the nature of oppression – how flexible it must learn to be, how many faces it must learn to wear if it is to succeed again and again’ (97).

Ikem’s new awareness of new perspectives is enhanced by his meeting with the delegates from his home region of Abazon, especially its leader, whose old-fashioned wisdom and dignity serve to remind him of the special responsibilities imposed on writers as repositories of communal memory. After he is suspended for writing an editorial on the delegation, the unusual calm with which he accepts his predicament is indicative of his emotional growth: Beatrice ‘had expected him to come in bristling with combativeness instead of which he seemed composed, even serene’ (146). Further evidence of this personal growth is seen in his lecture at the University of Bassa in which he seeks a more interactive experience than he could have ever got from his crusading editorials: ‘Dialogues are infinitely more interesting than monologues’ (154) he tells his audience. The interactive session is a fitting act of protest by a person who had previously theorised that the nation’s problems stemmed from ‘the failure of our leaders to re-establish vital inner links … with the bruised heart that throbs painfully at the core of the nation’s being’ (141).

Of the novel’s three main characters, it is Beatrice who has to make the longest journey to achieve personal growth because, unlike Chris and Ikem, she must pass through cultural and spiritual phases, as well as emotional and intellectual stages. Also, as a woman, she has to confront the additional bias of ingrained gender stereotype prevalent in African social milieu, a deficiency that even enlightened individuals like Chris and Ikem are susceptible to. Ironically, she has a greater awareness than either Chris or Ikem, even though she is not as intensely involved in national affairs as they are. She sees the destructiveness of the rivalry between them and her apprehensive prediction, ‘I can see plenty of trouble ahead for the two of you’ (65), turns out to be prescient in light of the tragedies that subsequently occur. Her desire to resolve their difficulties contrasts favourably with the stubbornness of the two men.

As a person requiring emotional growth, Beatrice is not without her own faults, however. Initially, she is far less self-aware than either Chris or Ikem, and her naïveté often expresses itself in sexual jealousy, such as can be seen in her undignified behaviour at the Presidential Lodge. Like other members of the Kangan elite, she is content to remain within a comfortable sphere of privileged existence and enjoy the benefits conferred on her by her social status, even when she knows that not all is well with the country. Her journey to self-realisation begins with her desire to heal the dysfunctional relationship between Chris and Ikem. From this, she focuses on the problematic dualisms that shape her own life: between Beatrice the civil servant and Nwanyibuife the priestess; between honouring the dead and succouring the living; between memory and prophecy; between past and present. Because her focus is on repairing damaged relationships, Beatrice needs to understand others, especially the
ways in which protest illuminates the hopes and fears of others. But she must understand herself first, and that is where her journey of personal growth really begins. She goes back in her memory to reclaim aspects of her personality which had been hidden from her by Christianity and western education. She comes to terms with her affection and solidarity with her abused mother, as well as her repressed feelings of hatred for her tyrannical father. In addition, she re-establishes contact with the vital essence of her traditional culture, and by so doing, comes to fully understand her priestly calling which had hitherto manifested itself as a barely-understood undercurrent in her life.

When he first meets her, Chris perceives her as ‘peaceful but very strong. Very, very strong’ (63-4); as she develops, this strength moves from being a hidden quality to an outward manifestation of her personality. As she comes into greater awareness of herself and her role, her pronouncements carry the weight of unerring prophecy:

I see trouble building up for us. It will get to Ikem first … 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. (115)

Like Chris and Ikem, her protest is shaken out of its elitist context when she comes face-to-face with the grinding poverty and widespread deprivation that the majority of citizens are forced to endure: when she visits the fugitive Chris where he is hiding, she discovers that ‘she was selfishly putting out a poor family’ (197). After the deaths of Chris and Ikem, Beatrice is the one who ensures that their memories are not forgotten, and makes certain that all subsequent relationships she enters into are founded upon mutual trust and genuine respect: she becomes ‘a captain whose leadership was sharpened more and more by sensitivity to the peculiar needs of her company’ (229).

Literary Technique

Achebe’s desire to highlight the paradox of protest can be seen through the literary technique he deploys in the novel. The plot sequence is heavily fragmented, with several instances of prolepsis (flashforwards) and analepsis (flashbacks) which enable the reader to obtain a multi-dimensional perspective of the action, thereby enabling him to understand the passions individual characters bring to the issues they care about. The narrative mode shifts between first and third person, with the consequence that a uniquely ‘inside-out, outside-in’ perspective is established which offers an insight into both the public personas that individual characters present to the world, as well as the ambiguous and complicated personalities that lie behind the public façade. When these modes of narration are complemented by the free indirect discourse utilised by the author, the result is a densely-woven narrative which incorporates a multitude of perspectives that engage one another in a contestation that actually approximates protest itself.

Achebe’s deadly seriousness about the profoundly significant issues which engage him is paradoxically given expression in a generally light-hearted manner of writing. The novel is replete with a variety of forms of humour, including clever wordplay, brazen ribaldry and the communally-enjoyed anecdotes that delineate the
Joys, follies and tragedies of contemporary life. Achebe utilises these to deepen the purpose of protest beyond the restrictions of a particular political or socio-economic issue. These devices enable Achebe to endow protest with a timelessness and depth which reinforce its importance in human society. It is as if Kangan’s situation is so dire that it has become an ironic joke, a country where one has to laugh to keep from crying. From the perspective of protest, such humour actually reinforces the moral outrage of those who protest, since it underscores the psychological resilience which underpins all protest.

In this regard, it is not surprising that many of the novel’s most ferocious and committed protesters are also its most humorous: Ikem, Beatrice and Mad Medico. Their capacity for laughter is indicative also of an ability to laugh at a system that is so paranoid about its own safety that it prescribes public executions as a form of mass entertainment. The regime’s distinct humourlessness is evident in its minions, like the ‘hard-faced orderly’ (20) and the ‘vaguely disagreeable’ (76) director of the repressive State Research Council who directly serve it. His Excellency himself (53) is an actor that has become so obsessed with putting up an impressive performance that he has virtually lost his humanity, and with it, his capacity to laugh at himself. His poor attempts at humour are distorted by the obsequious and sycophantic audience to whom they are addressed. In contrast, it is the victims of oppression and misrule, the ordinary folk, who are most attuned to humour. The novel resounds with the unforced and unassuming laughter of the so-called downtrodden as they courageously respond to the ironies and discordances of life. Ikem is surprised at the ‘voluminous folds of … laughter’ and concludes that the ‘poor man can forget what his humour is about and become altogether too humorous in his suffering’ (40), but Ikem’s notion of ‘suffering and smiling’ is too crude to account for the rage that also seethes among the poor, and which is as palpable as their seeming uncomplicated good humour.

Anger in Anthills of the Savannah is mediated by the need to maintain self-control so that it does not degenerate into uncontrollable chaos which would serve no purpose. Although most conventional portrayals of protest view anger as the most suitable emotion for its expression, Achebe’s more sophisticated approach means that it is carefully sublimated and channelled into safer or more productive channels: it therefore manifests as Chris’s studied indifference at cabinet meetings, Ikem’s wilful desire to annoy the high and mighty of Kangan’s establishment, Beatrice’s retreats into her priestess persona, and Mad Medico’s ironic graffiti. Even the humour earlier discussed is in some ways representative of a communal desire to dissipate energy before it attains dangerous levels. Anger is ever-present, nonetheless. It is as ubiquitous as the landscape, and as such, is never far from everybody’s minds, least of all the rulers who have the greatest cause to fear it. This dread can be seen in the way in which a panicked His Excellency abandons his carefully-cultivated aura of self-assurance at the noise of a visiting delegation from Abazon outside the Council Chamber:

the world surges into the alien climate of the Council Chamber on a violent wave of heat and the sounds of a chanting multitude. And His Excellency rushes back into the room at the same time, leaving the huge doors swinging. ‘What is going on?’ he demands frantically. (9)
He has reason to be afraid. Kangan is a country which has run out of excuses, and the resultant vacuum can easily result in an explosion of popular outrage. The ‘concealed weapon’ of rage that Ikem is unable to detect in the crowds at the public execution is unrecognisable because it is far more widely dispersed and camouflaged than he realises. It manifests itself in a myriad variety of ways: the meaningless battles for a few inches of space in traffic jams; the senseless venom of the soldier who compares a human’s life to a dog’s; the frenzied rage of the ‘red-eyed sergeant’ (176) who searches Beatrice’s flat. The importance of protest lies in its ability to take such fragmented and often self-destructive displays of anger and turn rage into outrage by focusing them in the appropriate manner. It is a task that the novel’s three main characters take up in their different ways. After falling out with the regime with which they have had such a troubled relationship, both Chris and Ikem devote themselves to open protest consciously designed to serve as rallying-points for widespread dissatisfaction and discontent. As Ikem tells Chris, ‘The very worst prescription for a suspended editor is silence’ (148). Chris, too, understands that anger is put to the best use when it is given a voice: ‘It was clear that Major Samsonite Ossai and his boss were adopting a quiet line. Therefore he must embark on a massive publicizing of the abduction’ (168).

Humour, anger and other motifs of protest are expressed through an imagery that is designed to complement the novel’s thematic preoccupations. Anthills of the Savannah deploys a great deal of sun and water imagery which are in line with its overall environmental ethos. The sun is a recurrent image. His Excellency’s sudden amiability is described as ‘The fiery sun retires temporarily behind a cloud’ (3). Ikem’s ‘Hymn to the Sun’ portrays the sun as an instrument of divine vengeance whose impact on flora, fauna and humanity alike is catastrophic. Both manifestations of the sun as unchecked power and environmental disaster are combined in the grim report from an Abazon elder that ‘all the water bore-holes they are digging in your area are to be closed so that you will know what it means to offend the sun’ (127). Water is another prominent image in the novel. Often manifesting as rainfall and rivers, the novel’s water imagery seems to offer an antidote to the harshness of the sun. Beatrice, the novel’s most redemptive character, is portrayed as a priestess of Idemili, a lake goddess, even though she dreaded being drenched by rain as a child. The third major image in the novel is that of darkness. Sometimes represented as night or as a lack of vision, darkness as an existential reality abounds in the novel. Ikem takes Elewa down ‘unlit stairs’ (36) and the taxi she uses does not have functioning interior lights.

These images combine with others to offer a collage of visual, tactile, olfactory and other physical sensations of protest, and thus enable it to transcend the limitations of an abstract concept and attain the visceral experiences of everyday reality. The novel’s sun imagery, for example, represents a complex arena for the issue of protest because it is symbolic of both the issues that are protested, as well as the way in which they can be protested against. In the novel’s context, the sun wreaks environmental havoc, but it is that same situation that inspires agitation for change. The Abazon delegation’s visit to the Presidential Palace is a good example of this: their region has been devastated by a prolonged drought, a situation which is worsened by their refusal to vote for His Excellency in a referendum proposing an
extension to his rule. Their visit is actually meant to show solidarity with him, but the authorities are convinced that it is a demonstration. In other words, the sun imagery reinforces the ubiquitous, atmospheric nature of the protest phenomenon as being driven by a dynamic that inevitably brings oppressors and victims into inevitable confrontation with one another, regardless of what they try to do to avoid it.

**Folkloric Elements**

An important part of the way in which Achebe reconfigures the concept of protest by eliminating many of the unexamined assumptions that often accompany conventional perceptions of it is through his use of myth, folktale and proverbs to illuminate the issue of protest. His use of folkloric elements and the wisdom drawn from patently indigenous sources demonstrates his realisation that a major part of Africa’s problems come from the disconnect between traditional and foreign cultures. In fact, Frantz Fanon claims that the repudiation of such estrangement is a revolutionary act, in other words, a profound act of protest:

> Intellectual alienation is a creation of middle-class society. What I call middle-class society is any society that becomes rigidified in pre-determined forms, forbidding all evolution, all gains, all progress, all discovery. I call middle-class a closed society in which life has no taste, in which the air is tainted, in which ideas and men are corrupt. And I think that a man who takes a stand against this death is in a sense a revolutionary.  

In *Anthills of the Savannah*, the active repudiation of the conventional postulations of radical rhetoric and its associated behaviour is accompanied by what may be called a corresponding indigenisation of the concept of protest by relocating it within the context of indigenous wisdom and traditional social mores. There is the myth of power, the folktale of the tortoise that is about to die, as well as a host of proverbs that bring out the resilience and insightfulness of the indigenous ethnic groups of Kangan. The folktale of the tortoise is particularly instructive. By inscribing marks of struggle on the ground in such a way that they outlive him, the tortoise demonstrates an important understanding of the principles which underpin all protest, namely, the fact that it is the nature of one’s response to oppression that matters, rather than the extent and scope of oppression itself. Something similar can be found in the folk wisdom inherent in the Abazon elder’s disquisition on the nature and role of the storyteller, which he suggests are superior to those of the warrior because he alone has the ability to endow the story with an existential significance that transcends whatever issue gave rise to it in the first place. When this is applied to protest, there are obvious parallels that can be seen. Like the storyteller, the protester is engaged in an activity whose import reaches far beyond the local issues that caused it; in a similar manner, the protester is not in control of his subject-matter – it is the subject-matter which actually controls him. Just as the storyteller is a visionary whose eyes are privileged to view aspects of reality that are unseen by others, so is the protester animated by ideals that are far beyond the capacity of non-protesters to imagine. The implications of comparisons like these find resonance on two levels. Within the novel, storytellers

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like Chris, Ikem and Beatrice are encumbered by this moral-visionary burden and compelled to follow its dictates whether they like it or not. All three take on the roles of storytellers: Chris is Commissioner for Information, Ikem is a newspaper editor, Beatrice has the task of gathering their memories together and setting them down both for testimonial and record purposes. Outside the novel, Achebe seems to be reasserting his long-held opinion that writers have a duty to serve as the conscience and guide of society, and as such are duty-bound to protest those aspects that are not in the long-term interests of the people.

In a similar manner to the vignettes discussed earlier, proverbs, saws and other pithy statements are an aspect of the novel’s folkloric element, and serve to locate protest within the matrix of indigenous experience. Bernth Lindfors underscores the importance of proverbs in Achebe’s work when he says,

proverbs are used to sound and reiterate major themes, to sharpen characterization, to clarify conflict, and to focus on the values of the society Achebe is portraying. By studying the proverbs in a novel, we gain insight into the moral issues with which that novel deals.\(^\text{14}\)

By indigenising understandings of attitudes to protest in *Anthills of the Savannah*, proverbs show that social class, education and gender do not inhibit a people’s ability to realise the constraints that have conspired to condemn them to a debilitating existence, nor do they restrict their ability to make caustic comments about the unacceptability of such a situation.

These sayings are scattered throughout the novel, and come mainly from its older, more traditional-minded characters such as the leader of the Abazon delegation and Elewa’s uncle. Like most proverbs, these sayings distil attitudes to life and living that have been comprehensively tested by experience. For example, ‘Every man has what is his; do not bypass him to enter his compound’ (123) testifies to the unshakeable logic that certain rights and possessions are inalienable, and therefore cannot be taken away by anybody, no matter how powerful. From the perspective of protest, such a saying has obvious associations: when rights that are inalienable are taken away, protest becomes a natural response, and its inevitability transcends the parochial limitations of race, ethnicity and social class. Similarly, ‘the cock that crows in the morning belongs to one household but his voice is the property of the neighbourhood’ (122) engages the issue of protest on two levels: the illogicality of attempting to claim individual control of a people’s outrage at injustice, and the fact that all individuals respond to the same social stimuli whether they like it or not, and are therefore fated to share the same fate for that reason. Elewa’s uncle self-righteously asks her mother, ‘what is the use of bending your neck at me like the chicken to the pot when its real enemy is not the pot in which it cooks, nor even the fire which cooks it but the knife?’ (226). This admonition is a reminder that the act of protest is useless if it fails to identify the real culprits.

It appears that Achebe’s purpose is to re-orient the mindset of those who seem to believe that protest is purely a modern phenomenon, engaged in only by educated citizens of a particular ideological bent. The mere fact that the most potent sayings are uttered by apparently uneducated individuals is a clear indication that an understanding of the motivations for protest are far from unknown, even in Kangan where the masses appear to be compliant and docile. It is little wonder that early on in the novel, His Excellency demands plain speaking and asks the loquacious Professor Okong to ‘cut out the proverbs’ (19). In addition to the obvious danger of such a widespread repository of traditional knowledge that could threaten his rule, authoritarian rulers like the President of Kangan fear the suppleness of proverbs: unlike a newspaper, they cannot be ‘occupied’ by security agents or closed down.

**Textuality of Protest**

*Anthills of the Savannah* is in itself a veritable record of various forms of protest. Its ability to recall, re-enact and distil the significance of the various overt and implicit manifestations of protest helps to establish their importance by simultaneously situating them within the specific context of their time and highlighting their timelessness and universality. At a general level, this seemingly paradoxical duality can be seen in the novel’s setting in the fictional nation of Kangan, and the corresponding creation of imaginary ethnic groups, environmental issues, political and other cleavages which, though plausible, never occurred in real life. Yet Kangan is recognisably Nigerian: even though the ethnic groups which comprise the country have been given different names, the Abazon, for example, are recognisably Igbo. Their indigenes have Igbo names, speak Igbo and act according to Igbo codes of conduct. By being simultaneously Nigerian and non-Nigerian, Achebe is able to achieve the difficult feat of utilising the emotional intensity that familiarity generates, while benefitting from the aesthetic distance and objectivity that the use of a fictional setting confers. Considered from the specific perspective of protest, such balancing enables the novel to situate issues of protest within an incontestably realistic context without succumbing to the second-guessing that such a contextualisation would inevitably inspire.

**Memory**

*Anthills of the Savannah* is essentially a work of sustained recall and recollection. By the time it starts, all the events recounted have taken place, with the various occurrences being pieced together by Beatrice, who avails herself of the use of Chris’s journal and Ikem’s poetry. As a record, the novel is essentially a testimony, testifying to the actions and inactions of individuals that led to the present situation. In this regard, it is no surprise that Chris and Ikem are designated First Witness and Second Witness respectively. Given the sycophancy, the oppressiveness and the conspiracy of silence under which the whole nation labours, such acts of witnessing are virtual acts of protest. They defy the elaborate system of repression put in place by the government and assert the inalienable right of the citizenry to have a say in the way in which they are ruled. The fact that these acts of defiance are undertaken by the Commissioner for Information and the editor of the government-owned newspaper, who should ordinarily be an integral part of the repressive order, only underlines the audacious courage of their actions. It is also significant that the main target of their
opposition happens to be a person who is a childhood friend of both of them. Indeed, it is ironic that a significant aspect of their acts of remembrance is their recollection of their carefree schooldays together. It is no coincidence that the devious Professor Okong and the Attorney-General refer to His Excellency’s old friendship with Chris and Ikem in their attempts to discredit them while ingratiating themselves with the president.

Beatrice’s recollections take place at two levels, reflecting her need to properly understand herself before she can begin to understand the events unfolding before her. In this light, it can be seen that the self-knowledge and self-awareness that remembering inspires are vital to the emergence of protest: before a person can express outrage at something perceived to be wrong, that person must first be sure of his own position. Recollection is also vital in establishing the credentials of those who protest in the novel, as well as the infamy of those against whom they are protesting. Beatrice’s recollections of Chris and Ikem are celebrations of the lives of the two men, and are clearly demonstrative of their courage, humanity and patriotism. This third-party perspective, as it were, helps to provide a fuller picture of their activist credentials, more than their own actions would have done, and therefore solidifies their status as genuine protesters who are only interested in the progress of their country and its people. In contrast are the recollections of His Excellency by Chris, Ikem and Mad Medico. The very fact that all three characters wistfully recall the decent man they had known in the past is a damning indictment of how far His Excellency has fallen. For a person who ‘had a wholesome kind of innocence about him’ (59), and who had ‘a kind of spiritual purity (65), the power-drunk megalomaniac that he has become is nothing short of tragedy. This is why it can be argued that Chris and Ikem oppose him so resolutely: they are mourning the end of innocence, as well as fighting against tyranny and injustice. It is also significant in this regard that individuals who are incapable of protest have severely circumscribed memories: Professor Okong no longer dared to remember’ (17) that His Excellency ‘had not so long ago been politically almost in statu pupillari to him’(17); His Excellency warns the Attorney-General against recalling a confidential discussion they have just had: ‘… you must forget that we ever talked about it’ (24).

The Contestation of Meanings
In considering the nature of protest in *Anthills of the Savannah*, it is apparent that Achebe considers all protest as essentially the contestation of meanings. The disagreements between His Excellency and people like Chris, Ikem, Beatrice and the others over the direction of Kangan stem from their differing perceptions of how the country can best make progress: the former believe in an authoritarian, top-down approach because they feel they have all the answers; the latter argue that such an approach has failed, and must give way to more inclusive approaches that take the ordinary citizen into greater consideration.

The novel is replete with disagreements and arguments to such an extent that the narrative is a virtual war of wills. The book opens with Chris and His Excellency, with their eyes combatively locked in a dangerous outward manifestation of a personality clash. Ikem engages a taxi-driver in a grim battle for a few inches of space in a traffic jam, and argues with Elewa over the necessity of her going home in the dead of night; Chris and Ikem argue over the latter’s editorial comments. Beatrice

engages a female American journalist over her seemingly inappropriate behaviour towards His Excellency, and quarrels with Chris over his seeming lack of concern for her wellbeing. Ikem has a brush with a traffic policeman over alleged illegal parking. Ikem turns his lecture at the university into a dialogue so that he and his audience can ‘exchange a few blows’ (154).

These disagreements run the gamut from the trivial to the very serious, but what unites them is the way in which they all involve a struggle over meanings. Individuals come into conflict with one another based on their perceived understanding of an issue, and it is the contesting interpretations that are the basis of protest. This is the reason why it is Chris and Ikem, who can claim to understand His Excellency better than anyone else, are the ones who ultimately oppose him so implacably. Throughout the novel, both men, along with Mad Medico, try to draw upon what they know about His Excellency in an effort to understand how he has become the person he now is. On his part, His Excellency feels betrayed by his old friends: ‘He said he was deeply wounded that we, his oldest friends, found it possible to abandon him and allow him to be disgraced’, Chris reports (147).

Part of the contestation of meanings in the novel takes place at the level of social class and occupation. Ikem’s stubborn desire to maintain a low profile in spite of his enviable status as editor of a major newspaper is seen by himself as a rejection of the crass materialism of Kangan society and a demonstration of his determination to remain true to himself, but the taxi-driver he has an encounter with re-interprets it as the unedifying miserliness of a man who is too selfish to give employment to those who desperately need it. Perhaps the most explicit argument over meanings is that triggered by the murderous soldier who nearly runs over a trader in the market:

‘Does he mean that after killing me he will go and kill a dog?’
And the others joined in the laughter.
‘No, he means that to kill you is like to kill a dog.’
‘So therefore you na dog … Na dog born you.’
But the victim stuck to his far more imaginative interpretation. ‘No,’ he said again. ‘If I kill you I kill dog means that after he kill me he will go home and kill his dog.’ (48)

It is interesting that this disagreement takes place at a secondary level, namely that of exactly what the soldier meant by his contemptuous retort, rather than questioning the propriety of the soldier’s behaviour. Achebe seems to be making the point that since protest is essentially about the contestation of meanings, the meanings that are open to such contestation should be properly identified so that the resultant contestations are not misdirected or meaningless.

Achebe’s concern with the importance attached to meanings can be seen in the profusion of wordplay, such as ‘Mandinga uls (38); mischievous double entredes which combine the innocuous and the ribald, such as Chris’s unwitting advice to Beatrice to ‘keep all options open’(73) on her visit to the Presidential Retreat; and the reversal of apparently stable meanings, such as Ikem’s ‘impending coup d’etat … against this audience and its stereotype notions of struggle’ (153).
Conclusion
This paper has significantly established that in Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah*, protest cannot be limited by notions of whether it is political, or overtly aggressive, or aimed at achieving radical social change. Instead of looking exclusively at its content, protest is portrayed by its intention, namely whether or not it is at variance with an existing or proposed state of affairs. The paper has further explicated that protest in the novel, manifested as any verbal or non-verbal means by which an individual or a group expresses disagreement with or support for an existing state of affairs in all or part of a given society. Protest as a mode of expression in the novel has been established by the paper as not just a means of ventilating grievances, but is also an arena for the clash of opposing views because it compels those on all sides of a given issue to consciously articulate and propagate the ideas that form the basis of the issues they are protesting for or against.

When *Anthills of the Savannah* is considered in relation to the issue of protest, it will be seen that the novel has demonstrated the ambivalence, ambiguity and complexity that is the hallmark of the most memorable literary approaches to the phenomenon of protest. Such features can be seen even in the very title of the book, *Anthills of the Savannah*. The clearest reference to it in the text is found in the following quotation:

> The trees had become hydra-headed bronze statues so ancient that only blunt residual features remained on their faces, like *anthills surviving to tell the new grass of the savannah about last year’s bush fires*. (31; emphasis added)

As described by Achebe, anthills are ‘survivors’ whose very presence is supposed to bear testimony to the occurrence of traumatic events in the past. In other words, the landscape is itself attesting to the presence of suffering and distress. From this perspectives, therefore, anthills typify, a reminder, a testimony, and by extension, an objection and a gesture of defiance. In essence, anthills are symbolic and literal manifestations of protest. Characters in the novel use protest to define themselves as individuals in opposition to the dictates of a repressively militarised society, to obtain access to rights hitherto denied them, to indicate the possibilities of change and progress.

*Anthills of the Savannah*, seems to represent a fitting culmination of a lifetime of literary commitment, weaving together as it does many of the diverse strands of his earlier novels and turning them into a comprehensive and far-reaching examination of a people’s response to societal challenges.