BOOK REVIEWS

Chinua Achebe. **Anthills of the Savannah.** (1987; rpt. New York: Doubleday, 1988).

Chinua Achebe's latest novel, Anthills of the Savannah, is a story of conflicts told from conflicting points of view. Thanks to a coup d'etat, three friends, Sam (H.E.), Ikem Osodi and Chris Oriko, find themselves at the helm of the affairs of the fictional African state of Kangan. Unfortunately for the African state, the three friends, described as "three green bottles" by another major character, Beatrice (p.176), are unable to leave their personal jealousies out of its governance. Their personal and inter-personal conflicts, compounded by "so many petty interests salaaming around" Sam, the Head of State (p.42), soon submerge their patriotism, sending out a signal which promptly draws a harsh response: another coup d'etat which none of the "three green bottles" survives, as they fall one after the other, just like the "green bottles" of the folk song.

With its action dominated by Sam, Chris, Ikem and Beatrice, cosmopolites with folk roots, the novel is both radical and conservative. Its setting is not predominantly rural, yet it is deeply entrenched in the folk-soil of the African state where Igbo, "the indigenous language of Bassa" (p.186), the capital of Kangan, seems to be the main language. It is thus a departure from the inimitable Achebean culture-conflict with no movement away from the cultural coloration of language and imagery for which the author of Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God, and No Longer at Ease is best known.

In consonance with the conflict-ridden plot and characterization, the narrative stance of the novel is such that the reader easily moves from the consciousness of one character to that of another in conflict with it. The result is an endless quest for the center of consciousness which, like a mirage, is as elusive as it is indeterminate. Fortunately, this trait which is less than felicitous and often boggles the mind, suggesting to it such embarrassing words as "confusion," "indecision," and "wobbly," also has a positive aspect. It synchronizes with, and heightens the confusion inherent in the novel (of conflicts) as an objet d'art. Stylistically, therefore, Anthills of the Savannah is significant as a successful synthesis of the object and manner of imitation in which the form, inseparable from the content of the novel, is the message of the work itself.

Anthills of the Savannah is also significant in another way. It embodies Achebe's most positive image of the modern woman in his novels so far. Beactrice Nwanyibuife Okoh, with "a walloping honours degree in English from London University" (p.57), is a sort of reincarnation of the powerful Chielo, "the priestess and prophetess of the Hills and Caves" in Things Fall Apart (p.105). A strong and clear-sighted woman, she is the guardian of the future of her country--a future

which is symbolized by Elewa and her daughter with a boy's name, Amechina.

Ironically, however, Anthills of the Savannah, Achebe's farthest excursion into the realm of feminism, does not leave the home base of such Achebe women as Elsie, Jean and the woman lawyer (in A Man of the People), Clara and the girls who buy scholarships with their bodies (in No Longer at Ease) to mention only a few. In spite of her strength of character, for example, Beatrice is satisfied to be Chris's mistress indefinitely. She has had at least one other lover, Guy, before Chris. Ikem Osodi who, like Christopher in No Longer at Ease, disposes of women as one chews and spits out pieces of succulent sugar-cane after wringing them dry, always uses her as a masturbatic stop-gap. Beatrice feels turned on almost every time a man touches her (pp. 92, 74, 104). Her association with, or response to, men, it must be pointed out, does not stem from any feminist quest for an independent life free from men's oppression, even though she knows that the common belief "that every woman wants a man to complete her is a piece of male chauvinist bullshit" (p.80)

Elewa, with her strong awareness of men's oppression as embodied in her ready interjection,"But woman done chop sand for dis world-o," (p.31), or its variant "But woman done suffer for dis world-o," (p.55) is a potential feminist. Yet she accepts the insult of Ikem Osodi who, "with his breathless succession of girlfriends" (p.83), likes making love to her till late at night, but dislikes spending a whole night with her in one bed (pp.31-34). She actually carries, and happily bears "a living speck of him" (p.169) to immortalize his "path" (p.206).

Gwen, a white woman whom Mad Medico (John Kent) "finds" for His Excellency, Sam, "to cheer him up" (p.55), is to all intents and purposes a nymphomaniac. Witness how Chris describes her encounter with Sam:

> "In the morning after a very exhausting night this girl, Gwen, wakes him up and wants to begin again. I remember how Sam put it: **My brother, there was absolutely nothing left in the pipeline.** So Gwen swings herself around and picks up his limp wetin-call with her mouth. And from nowhere and like magic life surges back into it. Sam had never seen that kind of thing before" (p.62. Emphasis in the original).

Another white woman almost robs Beatrice of her lover, Guy, on a dance floor (p.73). Incidentally, Louise, Chris's first wife, who does not give her body to men just for the asking is portrayed as a sick woman. This is what Chris says about her:"Louise was so bent on

proving she had a mind of her own she proved instead totally frigid in bed despite weekly visits to the psychiatrist" (p.58).

But Anthills of the Savannah is more than the images of sex-hungry and frigid women. It is very rich in themes. It is, above all, Achebe's most experimental novel. It may not be the best work of the author of Arrow of God. Its voice is self-conscious; it falters in places. Overcharged with patriotism, it sometimes resorts to tinkering to make characters, who should emerge naturally from the plot, bear the weight of preconceived ideas. Nevertheless, Anthills of the Savannah is an important contribution to world literature.

Chidi Ikonne

Marjorie Agosin, **Scraps of Life:Chilean Arpilleras**, trans.,Cola Franzen. Trenton, N.J.: The Red Sea Press, c 1987. 154 pp. $9.95 pap. $29.95 hardcover

When thousands of men were detained in Chile after the fall of Salvador Allende in 1973, the communities from which they were taken were traumatized. Women who had been trained to work only in the home were suddenly faced with the emotional stress of a missing family member; the moral necessity of traveling tirelessly from one detention/torture center to another in search of news or evidence of the missing one; and the immediate necessity of feeding and clothing children. The local church resources were stretched thin in such communities, and when , in 1974, it became clear that the detentions and disappearances were not going to abate, the Association of Families of the Detained-Disappeared was formed. Despite the ambiguous role of the Catholic Church in national affairs in Chile, the Vicarate of Solidarity, under the Archbishop of Santiago, was determined to assist the affected communities in coping and in developing organizations of self-help. This was achieved despite severe political pressure by the military.

The *arpilleristas* of this book are mainly women from the poorer areas, who make arpilleras (needlework appliques on sackcloth) that refer to the torture, detentions and disappearances of people in Chile because these events have touched them personally. Their *arpilleras* are smuggled out of Chile and sold abroad where they serve to denounce what is happening in Chile. The *arpilleristas* earn needed money from their works, even though they suffer arrests, harassment and detention