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"Keep Them at Arm's Length": Relationships between Homosociality and Power in *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Abstract

In Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, power exists along gendered lines, which produces two distinct forms of power, each of which leads to a different result by the conclusion of the novel. The members of each gender exercising power have close relationships with each other, thereby characterizing the power they exercise with homosociality, defined as social bonds between persons of the same sex that are not overtly sexual or romantic in nature. However, the way each gender performs homosociality is different as well, which then contributes to the formation of the two types of power. Yet, despite the interconnectedness of gender and sexuality, many postcolonial critics thus far have only examined the relationship between gender and power, but not the relationship between sexuality and power in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Given the strong relationship between gender and sexuality, there should be just as much of an imperative to explore the relationship between sexuality and power as there is for the relationship between gender and power, especially since one of the forms of power leads to the violent collapse of a ruling political body while the other leads to the prospect and start of rebuilding and reconciliation. This paper therefore takes up this imperative and analyzes how sexuality, as reflected through homosociality, leads to the different neocolonial and postcolonial systems and structures of powers in *Anthills of the Savannah*. Eve Sedgwick's *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire* serves as the theoretical framework on sexuality and homosociality from which further postcolonial analysis on sexuality and power is made. Sedgwick is supported by two postcolonial critics, Achille Mbembe and Oyeronke Oyewumi, who demonstrate the relevance of Sedgwick's writing for postcolonial criticism, since Sedgwick herself is not a postcolonial critic. Using these and other critics, this essay suggests that given that male homosociality is constantly characterized by anxious instability, and that male homosociality is inherently embedded within any social structure which is patriarchal in nature, then any system or structure of power which is patriarchal will inevitably be debilitated by that anxious instability which characterizes male homosociality. On the other hand, if we can see that female homosociality is capable of avoiding that anxious instability, then a system or structure of power which is characterized by female homosociality can likewise be more capable of achieving stability. These conclusions have implications for how changes based on gender and sexuality can be made for unstable systems of power.

Keywords: Anthills of the Savannah, Chinua Achebe, Postcolonialism

1. Introduction

In Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, power exists and is exercised along gendered lines, which means the novel produces two distinct forms of power, each of which leads to different results for the novel. Because power exists along gendered lines, whenever those with any sort of power are exercising that power, they are, for the most part, doing so with members of the same gender. Thus, Sam exercises his power with Chris Oriko, Ikem Osodi, and other male members of his cabinet while Beatrice exercises her power with Elewa and other female members of the community. Furthermore, these individuals all share a close or intimate relationship with those with whom they are

exercising their power, and because they are doing so with members of the same gender, what results is an exercising of power that is characterized by homosociality. However, the nature of homosociality between the genders is not the same either. Thus, in the novel, there are two genders that each perform homosociality differently, thereby producing two different kinds of power, each of which leads to different results by the conclusion of the narrative.

There is clearly a strong relationship between gender and sexuality. Yet, while many postcolonial critics thus far have examined the relationship between gender (often focusing specifically on either femininity or masculinity) and power in *Anthills of the Savannah*, not as many critics have addressed the relationship between sexuality and power in the novel, which must exist if a relationship between gender and power exists, given the interconnectedness of the two concepts. Thus, if two genders and two natures of homosociality produce two kinds of power that lead to different sociopolitical consequences, then it behooves us to examine just exactly how sexuality, as reflected in homosociality, leads to the different neocolonial and postcolonial systems and structures of powers in *Anthills of the Savannah*. This is an important matter to consider given that, in the novel, one form of power leads to the violent collapse of a ruling political body while the other leads to the prospect and start of rebuilding and reconciliation. It is my intention to argue, then, that given that male homosociality is constantly characterized by anxious instability, and that male homosociality is inherently embedded within any social structure which is patriarchal in nature, then any system or structure of power which is patriarchal will inevitably be debilitated by that anxious instability which characterizes male homosociality. On the other hand, if we can see that female homosociality is capable of avoiding that anxious instability, then a system or structure of power which is characterized by female homosociality can likewise be more capable of achieving stability.

2. Critical and Theoretical Background

The term "homosociality" was most notably popularized and expanded upon by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick in *Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire*. Sedgwick first informs readers that the word "homosocial" has been "used in history and the social sciences" to describe "social bonds between persons of the same sex" (1). It is, seemingly ironically, as much analogous *with* "homosexual" as much as it is intended to be distinguished *from* "homosexual." Sedgwick points out that the term is applied to activities of "'male bonding,' which may…be characterized by intense homophobia" (1). For that reason, homophobia is often strongest in institutions where the prevalence of male homosociality is also strong, such as in football teams, monasteries, and the military. Sedgwick sets much of her argument around the question of why this is so. And here, Sedgwick identifies an important distinction between male and female homosociality. She points out that "in a society where men and women differ in their access to power, there will be important gender differences, as well, in the structure and constitution of sexuality" (2). After all, it does not seem like bonds between women instigate the same homophobia that male bonds do. As Sedgwick explains it, "the diacritical opposition between 'the homosocial' and 'homosexual' seems to be much less thorough and dichotomous for women, in our society, than for men" (2). In other words, "the continuum" or distance between acts which constitute "women loving women" and acts which constitute "women promoting the interests of women" is not so great as the continuum or distance between "men loving men" and "men promoting the interests of men" (3). Thus, "when Ronald Reagan and Jesse Helms [got] down to serious logrolling on 'family policy,' they are men promoting men's interest," but, Sedgwick asks, "is their bond in any way congruent with the bond of a loving gay male couple?" (3). Quite obviously, "Reagan and Helms would say no—disgustedly" (3). In contrast, Sedgwick suggests, "women in our society who love women, women who teach, study, nurture, suckle, write about, march for, vote for, give jobs to, or otherwise promote the interests of other women, are pursuing congruent and closely related activities" (2-3).

In fact, "men promoting the interests of men" do very much the opposite of what "women promoting the interests of women" do. That is, "'obligatory heterosexuality' is built into male-dominated kinship systems, or that homophobia is a *necessary* consequence of such patriarchal institutions as heterosexual marriage" (Sedgwick 3). Thus, Sedgwick is arguing that systems which are structured for men to promote the interests of men necessitate the simultaneous suppression of "men loving men." This structure which oppresses homosexuals is the same system whose rules and relations oppress women. This makes sense since opening that system to include either women or homosexual men would divest the authoritarian control heterosexual men have in exercising power for the benefit and interest of themselves. Thus, patriarchy is continuously about the maintenance of power and about the perpetuation of a status quo which bestows the most benefits to those already in power. To take in change is to risk losing that system which provides those benefits. However, to resist something as ubiquitous and guaranteed as the forces of change is a difficult task, hence the anxious instability of male homosociality and patriarchy in general.

In *Between Men*, Sedgwick makes a point of moderating her analysis by reminding readers that her arguments are directed at describing social phenomena which are observable specifically to "our society" (1), by which she means the English-speaking West. Her insistence on including the qualifier "in our society" throughout her work, I believe, serves to illustrate her awareness of the fact that her arguments are not meant to be applied universally. All this is to acknowledge that Sedgwick is not a postcolonial critic and her arguments cannot be automatically and unconditionally applied to an analysis of *Anthills of the Savannah*, set in Kangan, the stand-in country representing Nigeria. Yet, her observations are highly useful for analyzing sexuality in the novel, and just because Sedgwick is not herself a postcolonial critic does not necessarily mean her arguments cannot be applied towards postcolonial criticism.

One essay which demonstrates the postcolonial relevance of Sedgwick's writing, as well as the relevance of Sedgwick's writing for *Anthills of the Savannah*, is "The Intimacy of Tyranny" by Achille Mbembe. In this essay, Mbembe argues that the "postcolonial mode of domination" works through a relationship of intimacy between the rulers and the ruled, in which there are "myriad ways ordinary people guide, deceive, and toy with power instead of confronting it directly" (128). Subjugation of the people by a tyranny no longer need be coercive or surveillant, since subjects have "internalized authoritarian epistemology to the point where they reproduce it themselves in all the minor circumstances of daily life" (128). Thus, subjects themselves are complicit in perpetuating tyranny or authoritarian rule. Furthermore, because the perpetuation is complicit and embedded within the "minor circumstances of daily life," it will also be seen as normative, thereby making that system of perpetuation easily dismissible, which is precisely the effect the laughter accomplishes. This laughter that Mbembe discusses is the same laughter we frequently see performed in *Anthills of the Savannah*, and it largely has the same effect as well, especially in the occasions where Sam's state officials laugh at Sam's words. For example, when asked by the Chief Secretary at a meeting whether he may "put in a word for the Honourable Commissioner," His Excellency, Sam, responds by saying the Honourable Commissioner for Information "doesn't need a word from you" since "he owns all the words in this country—newspapers, radio, and television stations" (Achebe 6). His Excellency's response draws "peals of laughter" that "engulfed everybody for minutes and put" everyone "at ease again" (6). Yet, despite the laughter, Sam's comment presents the authoritarian control of information that his regime uses as if it were the most normal thing in the world, and by laughing in response, the state officials dismiss the seriousness of the implications of such a practice, thereby becoming complicit, or even active, contributors to the tyranny.

Thus, while Mbembe may most specifically be addressing a relationship between the ruler and the ruled, his points are just as relevant for the relationship between Sam and his state officials, who nonetheless inhabit spaces analogous to the ruling subject and ruled subjects, respectively. Under Mbembe's definition, then, these men who hold the most power in Kangan share a relationship of intimacy. This is, most importantly, even more true for Sam, Chris, and Ikem, who have a shared history dating back to their youth and to their "first days at Lord Lugard College" (59). As Chris recounts it to Beatrice, the three of them "are all connected" and that one "cannot tell the story of any of [them] without implicating the others" (60). However, it is because the three of them are "too close together," Chris suggests, that "Ikem may resent [him]" but "probably resents Sam even more" and that "Sam resents both of [them] most vehemently" (60). Thus, we have here a relationship which very much resembles the dichotomy presented in Sedgwick's analysis where the intimacy of male bonds, such as that between Sam, Chris, and Ikem, harbors a simultaneous distancing reaction, such as homophobia or the resentment between Sam, Chris, and Ikem. Before exploring this relationship between intimacy and resentment, it is first important to note that the seeds of this kind of relationship, as well as Sam, Chris, and Ikem's education, were cultivated at British-modeled Lord Lugard College, which "trained her boys to be lonely leaders in separate remote places, not cooped up together in one crummy family business" (60). Sam, in addition, was further trained in Sandhurst, the legacy of which is the military regime ruling Kangan.

However, it is not merely the leadership, political, and power structure which was brought over and grafted onto Africa, but the role of women that such a structure assigned as well, and this is the primary concern for Oyeronke Oyewumi in the chapter "Colonizing Bodies and Minds" in her book, *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*. Oyewumi contends that "the imposition of the European state system, with its attendant legal and bureaucratic machinery, is the most enduring legacy of European colonial rule in Africa" (123). Especially problematic of that system was the exportation of a tradition which excluded "women from the newly created colonial public sphere," thereby cutting off women from "all colonial state structures" (123-124) and any position or role of power. This exclusion was made on the basis of reducing women to their biology, which was "a process that was a new development in Yoruba society" (124). Because the Yoruba had never had this system of categorization, "the arena of politics" was "an arena in which they [the women] had participated during the precolonial period" (257). By creating the "woman" as a completely new category and making that category a means of subordination, European colonization not only took away the power that women were capable of attaining before, but also permanently took away the *means* by which women could access power or authority in the present and future. Given that it is a European system that Oyewumi is criticizing, Sedgwick's writing is, therefore, useful precisely

because it is also a European system Sedgwick is criticizing. Indeed, what Oyewumi is arguing here, falls along the same lines as Sedgwick's observation that "in a society where men and women differ in their access to power, there will be important gender differences" (2), though Oyewumi may be likely to flip the direction of causation and argue that it was the creation of gender differences which led to a difference in the access to power. However, Oyewumi and Sedgwick would both likely agree that if women and men have equal grounds for accessing power, then there would be less gender difference, or that any differences would be less significant. If the European state system imposed and changed gender structures, then that system will have also imposed and changed sexuality as well. Furthermore, if changes in gender structure affected the structure of power, then those changes in sexuality will have affected the structure of power as well.

3. Patriarchy, Power, and Homosociality

In light of this fact, it is necessary to return to the relationship between the intimacy and resentment shared between Sam, Ikem, and Chris. Chris is not the only one who is able to recognize and acknowledge the nature of this relationship. In a private meeting with His Excellency, the Attorney-General tells Sam that Chris' loyalty may be up for question on account of recent suspicious behavior, which the Attorney-General attributes to Sam and Chris being classmates back at Lord Lugard College. The Attorney-General presumes that Chris "looks backs to those days and sees [His Excellency] as the boy next door" and "cannot understand how this same boy with whom he played all the boyish pranks…can today become this nation's Man of Destiny" (Achebe 21). Although the Attorney-General's presumptions about Chris' thinking are false, they nonetheless trigger the suspicions of Sam, who recollects old President Ngongo's advice: "Your greatest risk is your boyhood friends, those who grew up with you in your village. Keep them at arm's length and you will live long" (22). Thus, Sam, too, is able to see that there is some danger to intimacy which can possibly act as a threat to his political power. Hence, we may see here a strong impetus for the growing resentment that Chris is able to identify later on and link to their intimate past. Yet, even President Ngongo's advice does not suggest the complete elimination of that intimacy, but rather the establishment of a certain distance—an "arm's length"—from that intimacy. What this demonstrates is that, in the structure of the system of political power that Sam wields, there is some degree of closeness or intimacy which is beneficial to the performance and execution of Sam's political power. It is a degree of closeness which ensures that those who are close or intimate work together or comply in the name of a shared interest rather than oppose or resist that power. Yet, reach a level where there is too much closeness and less than the "arm's length" of distance and the obligation for compliance or cooperation falls apart, thereby enabling the capacity for resistance. Conversely, reach a level where there is too little closeness and far more than an "arm's length" of distance and that obligation for compliance or cooperation would likewise cease to exist. To reuse Sedgwick's example, the degree of closeness and distance between Reagan and Helms allows them to cooperate in planning family policy with a shared agenda, say, of heterosexual marriage. Yet, were Reagan and Helms to be in an affiliation that was too intimate, they would likely find that their interest in family policy would no longer align with the interests of their male peers in power, even if their interests would be shared between just the two of them. If their affiliation grew too far apart, the interests of one party would likely no longer align with the interests of the other. Thus, in attempting to maintain just the right balance between homosexuality on one end of the continuum and homophobia on the other end, male or patriarchal structures of power must constantly strike for a precarious and unstable middle ground of male homosociality.

The latter path where too much distance has grown is, I would argue, what triggers the series of events that results in the collapse of Sam's political regime. Sam, whose resentment and suspicions have been accruing since the start of the novel, distances himself from Chris and Ikem to such a degree that he is no longer able to take into account their bond and possible common interests. Sam, in reacting against the side of intimacy on the continuum, thus falls too far to the other end. There is evidence of this distancing in the very narrative structure of the novel, which begins with several engagements with Sam. However, as the narrative progresses, we start seeing less and less of Sam, which serves as an indicator that Sam is detaching himself further and further from the personal lives and narratives of Chris and Ikem, our two main focalizers. Furthermore, we see Sam start using intermediary parties to interact with Chris and Ikem, such as using the *National Gazette* instead of inquiring with Ikem directly about his speech, or using the Director of the State Research Council to deal with issues. Having teetered too heavily to one end of the continuum then, Sam and his government must resort to violence, as patriarchy often does. In fact, one might wonder why patriarchy is so prevalent given its unstable nature, but it is capable of enforcing itself so persistently precisely because it is so heavily reliant on violence. Furthermore, it is difficult to oppose violence without also resorting to violence, which means the opposing force likely has a structure of patriarchy as well and would be no less unstable than those they were opposing. Thus, the inability of patriarchal power structures to find a more stable ground in the continuum

between homosexuality and homophobia other than unstable male homosociality creates a vicious cycle of political disorder and violence that is a hallmark of neocolonial influence, i.e. coup d'état after coup d'état in endless civil war.

In contrast to male power structures, Achebe portrays female power and leadership as a means of breaking that vicious cycle, with Beatrice in the center of that portrayal. As many past critics have noted, Beatrice, Elewa, and other female members of the community represent through the naming ceremony at the end of the novel the capacity for female leadership to forge a new future of societal structure. By having the women name Elewa's female baby "Amaechina," a traditionally male name meaning "may-the-path-never-close" (Achebe 206), Achebe suggests that such a "path" will be forged by women and that, in doing so, they will revise the male dominated tradition to have a greater role for women. Even though it is specifically Beatrice who decides on the name of the baby, she nonetheless states says that it is "we" who "shall call this child Amaechina" (206), thus demonstrating the implicit solidarity that exists amongst the women, as opposed to the fragmented relationships between the men, which persists even into the naming ceremony in the relationship between Emmanuel and Captain Abdul Medani. Again, it is through Beatrice that Emmanuel and Abdul are able to end up on more friendly terms.

Yet, one must still ask why it is that women are more capable of effecting a more stable sociopolitical system. One useful essay for revealing some insight on this question is "Revalorizing Women's Agency: Motherhood in *Anthills of the Savannah*" by Caroline Mbonu. In her essay, Mbonu argues that *Anthills of the Savannah* "retrieves and reconstructs motherhood" so as to make it "contemporaneous" (126). She suggests that Achebe "weaves an old understanding of motherhood with a new meaning of motherhood in contemporary society to create a new understanding of the term" (126). One such understanding Mbonu highlights is that "motherhood constitutes service" (113). Motherhood is "always on duty, always thinking about how to build up the family, the community and bring beauty to life" (113). Thus, motherhood is revised and reinterpreted such so that it now "valorizes and can become liberative" (113). For Mbonu, this is what Beatrice and Elewa are channeling when they create and lead the rebuilding of a future. Mbonu's interpretation makes sense if one considers the fact that being a mother means that the mother will love her children if she wants what is best for them. Thus, being a mother almost guarantees the existence of an intimate relationship which loves unconditionally, regardless of gender. If a mother has a son, she must love a member of the opposite gender. If a mother has a daughter, she must love a member of the same gender. Thus, homosociality for women is not so much about maintaining and exercising power as it for men. Because female homosociality is not reliant on maintaining a precarious balance on a continuum of the attitude toward sexuality, it is therefore more stable. Any power structure which rests on that, then, rests on the stability of motherhood.

This interpretation, however, is not without its problems. In "Masculinity in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*," Clement A. Okafor suggests that "the actions of the new leader [Beatrice] parallel those that Igbo women would take in real life if their community were threatened by disaster" (159). He adds that "by wielding the 'spear thrust into the ground by the men in their hour of defeat,' Beatrice merely assumes the traditional role of women in Igbo as well as in many other African societies: the court of last resort" (159). Okafor is arguing that Beatrice's actions are a beneficial antidote which relieves the social damage caused by traditional masculinity. However, his analysis raises a series of important questions: Are women only supposed to take up power or leadership roles in the case of disasters and last resorts? Furthermore, is it suggested that women are only capable of assuming leadership roles once there is a power vacuum? Is that space closed to them at all other times? And what happens once much of the rebuilding and reconciliation are done? Indeed, much of the language and scenarios describing women taking power or leadership thus far have revolved around women constructing a new future, but not what happens once that reconstruction nears a conclusion. This is one of the problems with Mbonu's more essentialist—albeit also restorative—interpretation of female power. If male homosociality is about power maintenance and assertion and female homosociality is about reconciliation and rebuilding, then upon whom does it fall to maintain and guarantee the peace that has been achieved through reconciliation and reconstruction?

4. Conclusion

The answer, as Achebe's conclusion and Mbonu and Okafur's interpretations seem to suggest, would be men once again. If the male power has remained unchanged though, the political structure would once again return to patriarchal rule that would undoubtedly undo the peace and stability. What I am suggesting, then, is that Achebe's optimistic conclusion in *Anthills of the Savannah* is not some conclusive solution on which critics can then base their models and theories of womanhood, sexuality, and the uniqueness that women can bring to solving social or political problems. Achebe's conclusion is the first step in a long process. If one argues that women are inherently good or bad at one thing and men are inherently good or bad at another thing, then there will always be restrictions to what women and men can or should do or access. Thus I do not use sexuality to argue that men will inherently destabilize power and

so they should always stay out of positions of power, or that women are inherently more suited for only certain political processes, but rather to argue for changes in the understanding of sexuality, especially between men. I would further suggest men learn to make changes from women. Yet, that suggestion would not be possible to achieve if we argue that what makes female power more stable is that women belong to the female sex, which would restrict the means and capability for each gender to make beneficial social and political changes. In effect, it eliminates a vital dialectic between men and women for solving or improving sociocultural and sociopolitical ills.

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