Depicting Power: Landscapes of *Anthills of the Savannah* and *The House of the Spirits*

In both Chinua Achebe’s *Anthills of the Savannah* and Isabel Allende’s *The House of the Spirits*, the landscape depicts more than just mere scenery. Both novels portray political power struggles among the native people after European colonization has ended, and both use the landscape to illustrate the effects that colonization has had on the people and politics in those territories; however, the landscape in each novel works to represent different aspects of political power. In *Anthills of the Savannah*, for instance, greenery and water illustrate power through wealth. In contrast, the landscape of *The House of the Spirits* demonstrates the façade of the powerful—nothing is as it seems on the outside. Although there are differences in the symbolism of the landscape in both novels, Achebe and Allende effectively use the landscape to enhance the portrait that they paint of the power structures left behind by European colonization: Power only seeks to retain power, and all those who are not of the same class and means as the powerful, although ignored, will never go away.

In Achebe’s fictional nation of Kagan, the intellectuals and powerful live among green grass and flowing water while the poor Abazonians live in dry, desert land without water. According to Paoi Hwang, the green landscape and abundance of water “[denote]
modernization, development, and higher standards of living,” in *Anthills* (168). At the building of the Council Chamber, for example, a “low hibiscus hedge outside the window and its many brilliant red bells stood still and unruffled” (Achebe 8). Also at the presidential retreat, there is a “great shimmering expanse of the artificial lake waters [. . .]” (67). The powerful elite are surrounded by plants and water, and, especially notable, an artificial water source. However, the home of the poor people of Abazon has no such luxuries; in fact, there is very little plant life or water:

The only green things around now were the formidably spiked cactus serving the shelter around desolate clusters of huts and, once in a while in the dusty fields, a fat-bottomed baobab tree so strange in appearance that one could easily believe the story that elephants looking for water when they stilled roamed these parts would pierce the crusty bark of the baobab with their tusks such the juices stored in the years of rain by the tree inside its monumental bole. (194)

Their terrain is barren and dusty. The elephants that at one time came to the region for water that was stored inside the tree have left because there is no more water. Yet, the Abazonians are still there. According to Hwang, “greenery is temporary and water is not always present to sustain one way of life [. . .] the African people have always been sufficiently adaptable to make the best of what is theirs—that is until the belief that green is a better was introduced” (172). Because the Abazonians have been ignored, they do not know the concept precipitated by European colonization that “green is better;” therefore, they are able to adapt to the desert environment in which they have
always lived. This contrast in living conditions between the two groups demonstrates not only the political power structure in Kagan, but also the resilience of those without power.

In *The House of the Spirits*, Allende, however, uses the description of the Trueba house in the city and the landscape of the city after the military coup to represent the hidden truth of the powerful. Estaban Trueba beautifully constructs his house to reflect his power. It has a “French garden with topiaries fit for Versailles, deep wells of flowers, a smooth perfect lawn, jets of water” as well as “several statues of the gods of Olympus and [ . . . ] two courageous Indians” (Allende 93). It has “rows of columns,” “a majestic staircase,” and “white marble;” the house gives “the overall appearance of order and peace, beauty and civilization, that was typical of foreign peoples” (93). However, the house does not stay majestic, especially on the inside. Over time, the staircases lead to nothing, “doors [hang] in midair,” the hallways become crooked (93), and the “rear garden [is] a tangled garden” (225). Although the outside of the house never changes, the inside deteriorates. The façade of the house reveals the façade of Estaban’s power. In the same way, when the military gains power, they construct façades to hide the existence of civil war and the poor:

Cement walls were erected to hide the most unsightly shantytowns from the eyes of tourists and others who preferred not to see them. In a single night, as if by magic, beautifully pruned gardens and flowerbeds appeared on avenues; they had been planted by the unemployed to create the illusion of a peaceful spring. (381)
These cement walls only mask the situation created by the coup. The violence has not stopped; the poor are still there; the “illusion of a peaceful spring” is only that, an illusion. The chaos inside Estaban Trueba’s gorgeous house and the mirage of peace and prosperity constructed by the fascist regime demonstrate that power is fleeting. There will always be those who will challenge power, and there will always be those who remain powerless.

Both Achebe and Allende create landscapes that symbolize the propensity of the powerful to remain in power. Achebe’s contrasting depictions of the environment of the elite class of Kagan and the poor class of the Abazons is striking. While the elite class is surrounded by vegetation and water, the Abazons live in a desolate environment and struggle for water to survive. However, the Abazons will survive because they can adapt to any environment in which they live. In Allende’s novel, the landscape shows beautiful façades hiding ugly truths. Inside Estaban Trueba’s home, it is chaotic and unruly, yet this is hidden behind a magnificently structured house. In the same way, the cement wall constructed by the military to hide the poor, and the flowers planted to provide an illusion of peace are only mere illusions. The poor are still there; the opposition is still fighting against the military’s fascist regime. Although the two authors use landscape to depict power in different ways, both authors show the enduring will of the powerless to adapt and fight long after the powerful have fallen.


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