



Culture and Identity: A Resilient Character Portrayal

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ABSTRACT

One man took it to himself to tell the story of Nigeria through the eyes of its own people. Considered by many as the father of modern African literature, Chinua Achebe was awarded the Intellectual Man Booker Prize in 2007. His first novel *Things Fall Apart*, is often considered his best, and the second work, *No Longer at Ease*, is part of the African Trilogy, along with *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. My paper attempts an analysis of the clash of culture as depicted in the novel. A psychological study of the main character is done with reference to Homi J. Bhabha's theory of hybridity. One of Bhabha's central idea is that of "hybridization" which describes the emergence of new cultural forms because of multiculturalism. Instead of considering colonialism as something of the past, Bhabha shows how its histories and culture constantly intrude in the present, demanding that we transform our understanding of cross-cultural relations.

Keywords: colonial encounter, moral destruction, cultural independence, original fertility.

The novel, *No Longer at Ease*, deals with the life of an Igbo man Obi Okonkwo, who leaves his village for an education in Briton and then a job in the Nigerian colonial civil service, but is conflicted between his African culture and western lifestyle and ends up accepting a bribe which was against his ethics. Culture and identity, as discussed in the story, are two interrelated terms, and one can shape the other. Colonialism is one historic event for the confrontation of two cultures. Coming to the story, Nigeria is a place with a colonial background that results in the formation of an ambivalent and hybrid identity in the heart of 'darkness'. The protagonist of the novel, Obi Okonkwo, a Western-educated young chap, belongs to the category of a second-generation Christian convert. His father, Issac Okonkwo, is a first-generation Christian convert and so he is very adamant with the Christian values, origin, and culture. Unlike his father, Obi hopes to return after the completion of his education to cure his native land from 'corruption' and to help his people to lead a 'cultured and civilized life'. But the contrary happens. Obi himself gets trapped in a case of bribery. Achebe, in his novel, displays the colonial encounter with the indigenous people of Nigeria, which resulted in the formation of a hybrid cultural identity that is constantly unstable, lingering between the two contours and thus creating 'no longer at ease' all the time. Bhabha calls this place the "third space of enunciation" (Bhabha 1994:37).

Obi is a man from the Igbo tribe, and his mother tongue is Igbo. But as his name suggests, he is an altered form of pre-colonial self. There is ample evidence that proves that Obi is a man with a hybrid-self. After Obi's return to Umuofia to attend his graduation ceremony, he hears a folkloric song sung by the traders in the wagon. Although he had heard it many times before, now he gets a different feeling from listening to it. He translates it to English in his mind and he immediately realizes that the English translation of these songs helps him to understand their meaning for the first time. The analysis of Obi and other characters in the novel shows that there is a constant cultural interaction between the colonizers and the colonized. Therefore, Obi is 'no longer at ease' with himself, Nigeria, and his identity.

His description in the characterization, description of Lagos and the Umuofia party union shows the interaction and mixture of the British and the African culture. In some places like the restaurants in Lagos, interaction between the African and the European creates a "third space" in the novel. In such places elements of both cultures come together and it create a new culture, which Homi Bhabha calls "third space" or "third culture". These places also show the postcolonial Nigeria where no purity in culture is found. Achebe through

the novel, is trying to focus on Bhabha's notions on hybridity and the mixture of cultures and at the same time, he has not failed to bring forth the post-colonial elements in the pure African culture.

Achebe is careful to maintain in Obi those constant characteristics and the reasons for his breakdown. Obi, in his first appearance, is an enthusiastic and idealistic young Nigerian, intent on serving his country through a highly idealized yet acceptable moral code. In the end, he is defeated: his idealism is destroyed, and he is the subject of popular interest not so much because he 'ate bribe' but because he was caught. Achebe portrays the changes through which Obi passes with considerable astuteness of observation. We see how the pressures on him in his private and public life lower his spirits, reduce his moral strength, and ultimately cause him to put scruples aside. However, much as he has altered at the close of the book, we see him as the same Obi whom we met when the flashback section of the book began. Nor do we find the changes in him inexplicable. For, from the start, we have been aware of the weakness in his nature which in difficult circumstances will render him impotent.

Obi has no moral strength to match and support his intellectual strength. When his intellectual decision about what is right- the need to thwart corruption and, in the case of Clara, the need to stand against the Osu tradition- are challenged. He has little strength to resist the challenge. The situation in which Achebe places Obi is precisely those most likely to find out his weakness; and he shows exactly and with economy how Obi gives way to his weakness, vacillates, and adjusts his principles to suit his actions until ultimately, he is transformed to the man of the final pages of the novel. Obi's experiences testify, in situations which are sometimes comic, sometimes pathetic, and sometimes grim, to the oppressive rate of doubt, guilt, and shame and regret that the colonial experience has imposed in modern Nigeria, particularly on young men in the city where the effects of this history are most carefully organized and acutely felt.

The focus of Achebe in his second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, is the crises of hybrid culture which results in ambivalence of consciousness and the character's ability for resilience. The title of the book indicates the psychic dislocation experienced by the protagonist, Obi Okonkwo and the general confusion that spread through Africa. Colonial education, camouflaged under the grab of liberal education, released a kind of alienating force in Africa, blowing away all the traditional values and customs that bound the tribes together. Colonial education subdued native capacity and marginalized the people from their immediate society. The nature of colonial education is such that it produces a colonial mentality, corruptive and acquisitive bent of mind, and most importantly, the neo-elite becomes 'parasitic', 'unimaginative' and 'lacking in initiative'. Education is looked upon as a ladder to better jobs, money and higher ways of living. Through Obi, Achebe seems to portray that the educated elite are spineless. Having been exposed to the Western education and culture, Obi becomes a hybrid man with dual cultural and value systems which incapacitate him to live in Nigeria.

Obi returns to Nigeria after graduating from London, full of idealistic belief that he will help his nation to get rid of corruption and he joins Civil Services with a firm belief "that the public service of Nigeria would remain corrupt until the old Africans at the top were replaced by young men from the universities" (NLE 31). But he is shocked when he confronts reality-corrupted society and moral anarchy everywhere. His beloved Nigeria has undergone a sea-change, and the wind of change has uprooted the traditional views and values without a substantive replacement of the old values. Obi's idealism collides with reality and results in spiritual disintegration. He is placed in an inescapable labyrinth from which he finds no escape.

Obi finds his Western education difficult to comprehend the reality and he finds himself ineffectual. His dream of uplifting Nigeria goes in vain. Even the widegap between Obi's idealism and the reality of Lagos can be seen in the poem which Obi had written when he was in the slums of Lagos. The Western education has robbed all his finer sensibilities, thus failing to reconnect him with his inner self. The Umuofia Progressive Union externalizes its dreams in Obi, and they not only expected to repay the "scholarship", but they also wanted him to work for the betterment of Nigeria. What Achebe does in *No Longer at Ease* is "to give corruption a social context, and to show that the context is a complex interaction of African past, the colonial encounter, and the emergent new hybrid culture". (Interview with Achebe).

It is not simple that Obi's career is confused, muddled and an anti-climax. Obi in *No Longer at Ease* plays the role of black Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Kurtz is a hollow man between whose idea and reality. Obi's case is much more than losing touch with his family, culture, and mother tongue, but rather it implies the total acquisition (resilience) of white values- pragmatic devotion, efficiency, and utilitarian motives.

Obi, at the time of his interview he accepts Graham Greene's *The Heart of the Matter* as the only sensible novel any European has written. But the only negative he finds in it is that

it was nearly ruined by the happy ending". 'Happy ending? Are you sure it's The Heart of the Matter you are thinking about? The European police officer commits suicide. The police officer is torn between his love of a woman and his love of God, and he commits suicide. It's much too simple. Tragedy isn't like that at all. (NLE 32)

Through these words, Achebe is signalling the reader that the protagonist Obi is moving towards his destruction. The concept of tragedy that Obi has in his mind is far worse than what happens to him in his life. So, in one way it is sure that Obi's end is not an ultimate tragic end and therefore can be labelled as a resilient character.

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