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CORRUPTION, BOTH PERSONAL AND SOCIAL: THE PREDOMINANT THEME OF ACHEBE'S NOVEL, *NO LONGER AT EASE*

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Abstract

The novel starts when Obi is on trial in a court and the judge states that he is unable to comprehend how a young, brilliant and educated man can take bribe.

Obi, an idealist and graduate from a reputed British University, returns to Nigeria with high British ideals and is appointed as a civil servant. He falls in love with Clara an Osu i.e., an outcast. He struggles to convince his family and fails to do so. He also fails to stick to his ideals under economic pressures. Initially, Obi is shocked to see the prevalent corrupt ways in the Post-Colonial Nigeria. He is no longer at ease in the society given into the unscrupulous system. When he is in adverse financial crisis, he consciously makes himself prepares to take bribe but unconsciously feels guilt. With the death of his mother, his psychological moral force vanishes. His mother could be likened to his idealism. In the end Obi is presented as a snake that has casted out its slough i.e., he is presented as "guiltless" reality and nothing.

This paper throws light on the personal as well as social corruption in the post-independent Nigeria. Obi is caught between the worlds of two different religions and cultures.

Keywords: Corruption, Post –colonial Nigeria, Economic Pressure, psychological Moral Force.

Achebe grew to sensitive manhood in British Nigeria in the middle of twentieth century and became closely acquainted with the ills of the colonial administration during his undergraduate days at Government College, Umuahia. In his novels he traced the history of his Igbo land from the pre-colonial, colonial to post-colonial days.

Achebe's insightful study of traditional African society taught him that the disintegration of the African society was due to its internal infirmity as to its subjection from external colonial force: the

traditional African society broke because it could not bond. The colonial administrators disrupted an ordered African society by imposing on it their own forms of government and religious worship. Achebe interpreted African history through his African eyes without any bias or prejudice.

Achebe's novel, *No longer at Ease* was published in 1960, the year in which Nigeria attained independence from British rule. Achebe had watched the members of the colonial society and their misrule closely, thoroughly and intimately. The

degree of corruption which Achebe saw in the administration of his colonial masters was sufficient to horrify him greatly. With the attainment of independence, Achebe hoped that the vestiges of corruption would disappear from Nigerian society. But he was sadly mistaken as corruption began to show its ugly teeth in the post – colonial, Nigerian society. Therefore, the novel, *No Longer at Ease* can be looked upon as a post – colonial novel in which the novelist is strongly critical of the reiteration of the tendencies of the colonial rule.

It is in the fitness of things to understand the principal features of post – colonial literature. The post – colonial literary artist believes in the appropriation of colonial languages. He believes in showing the ugly aspects of colonialism which continue unabatedly after a nation attains independence. He prioritises nationhood and nationalism. He upholds the cultural values of the pre-colonial society.

Achebe had written *No Longer at Ease* as a sequel to his first novel, *Things Fall Apart*. The protagonist, Obi Okonkwo is the grandson of Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart*. Obi returns to Nigeria from England after finishing his graduation from a reputed British University. This brilliant Obi has not only imbibed British education but also British ideals. Small wonder Obi feels ‘no longer at ease with things’ as he finds them in his beloved Nigeria. What gives Obi a rude jolt is the prevalence of corruption in every layer of national life. Achebe uses Obi and his views to offer a criticism of the bane of corruption. When, Obi is looking at the vicious degree of corruption all around him, Achebe is also looking at Obi in a critical manner mainly in order to see whether he can stand up against becoming a victim of the very thing (corruption) which he is critical about.

Achebe introduces flashbacks, proverbs, poems, anecdotes and even stories to increase the content of the novel which is truly rich. The novel has been written in a third-person narrative. The story is told from the perspective of Obi.

In his *Rhetoric of Fiction* Wayne C. Booth discusses his views on the ‘Implied Author’. Booth explains that even when the narrator is not

dramatized in a novel an implicit picture of an author is created who stands behind the scenes. Achebe stands behind the scenes while depicting the character of Obi and he does not fail to make ironical remarks through the narrator.

The novel begins at the end of Obi's career with his trial. The judge of the High Court of Lagos in his summing up raises a question. Obi tries to be nonchalant to the statement of the judge but he fails to be indifferent when the judge tells probingly:

“I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this” (*No Longer at Ease* p.2)

Cases of bribery were not uncommon in colonial Nigeria but they were not so rampant as in independent Nigeria or post-colonial Nigeria. It transpires that some civil servants have bribed a doctor to obtain certificate of illness so that they can avail themselves of a sick leave. But their real intention to apply for a sick leave is clear. They intend to attend the trial in which Obi is charged to have taken bribe. David Cook substantiates the point in the book *African Literature: A Critical View*. Cook states that the central theme of *No Longer at Ease* focusses on ‘The complex economic pressures in the form of bribes.’ (*African Literature: A Critical View* p.96). Obi is tempted to accept bribes and in doing so, he clearly demonstrates that he is in conflict with two worlds’, the scrupulously honest world of the British and the corrupt world of his fellow Nigerians.

Achebe now focuses on the views of the clan of Obi. The functioning of the Lagos branch of the Umuofia Progressive Union is not proper. Instead of sending their favoured son to jail for his act of bribery they require the assistance of a reputed lawyer who can acquit him in the trial. The members of Obi's clan decide to stand by their favoured son for two reasons. In the first case, the Umuofia Progressive Union has taxed its members to pay for his passage and education in England. Secondly, they decide to remain loyal to Obi because he is the only member of the clan in a post reserved for the Europeans.

On the one side most of the members of the Umuofia Progressive Union desire to hire the

services of a good lawyer to save Obi in the trial. There are members who vent their displeasure against Obi for his felony. This displeasure is stated loud and bold by both the members and the president of the Union by their proverbial statements. Obi's downfall and shame are vented thus: "He that fights for a never-do-well has nothing to show for it except a head covered in earth and grime." (*No Longer at Ease* p.5) Another member who is sympathetic to Obi reacts to the speech of the president thus: "The fox must be chased away first; after that the hen might be warned against wandering into the bush." (*No Longer at Ease* p.5) Obi's indulgence in bribery is a sign of his lack of experience as a newly grafted officer in the civil service and the President makes no bones about this: "I am against people reaping where they have not sown. But we have a saying that if you want to eat a toad you should look for a fat and juicy one." (*No Longer at Ease* p.5) The president adopts a hard stance against Obi, but when the question of loyalty to one's kinsman is raised, he throws all moral consideration to the winds and states that "a kinsman in trouble had to be saved not blamed, anger against a brother was felt in the flesh, not in the bone." (*No Longer at Ease* p.4)

Valorization of cultural identity is a feature of post-colonial literature and the novel, *No Longer at Ease* bears testimony to this. Achebe presents the character of Mary, a zealous Christian who reflects the cultural identity in her proverbial speeches. She gives vent to several proverbial speeches in the novel. We recall one such speech: "We are like little children who only wash their stomach when they bathe, leaving their back dry" (*No Longer at Ease* p.8). As a zealous Christian she could have chosen homiletic speeches from Christianity but she preferred to choose proverbial speeches from Ibo language and culture on account of their rich tradition.

The career of Obi is soiled on account of his moral turpitude. In this connection we recall the advice of Pastor Ikedi who brings about a diametrical opposition between the past and present of Umuofia: "Umuofia would have required of you to fight in her wars and bring home human heads. But those were days of darkness from which we have

been delivered by the blood of the Lamb of God. Today we send you to bring knowledge. Remember that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom." (*No Longer at Ease* p.9)

Achebe, projects Obi as a man of moral depravity and this decline is inversely proportional to his career as a bureaucrat. Obi disappoints his clan and brings it to a humiliating position by his corrupt ways. We should do well to remember what the narrator says of Obi in the beginning. His decline is the result of his loss of Clara and the death of his mother.

The narrator depicts Obi's life in England. He devotes a few lines to Obi's love for Clara, an attractive nurse. During his four-year stay in England Obi was drawn to Nigeria and her culture. Glorification of nationhood and glorification of nationalism are salient features of post-colonial literature and *No Longer at Ease* is no exception. Achebe affirmed, "It was in England that Nigeria first became more than just a name to him. That was the first great thing that England did for him." (*No Longer at Ease* p.11)

Achebe shows that the illusion of Obi regarding Nigeria is shattered when he returns to Lagos from England. The squalid slums in and about Lagos have a petrifying effect on his mind. When he witnesses the officers of the customs department at Lagos airport freely indulging in bribes without even batting their eyelids his idealistic values which he had inculcated in England got a rude jolt.

Achebe points at certain flaws in Obi's dress habits in the reception accorded to him by the members of the Umuofia Progressive Union. He dons shirtsleeves instead of a suit, thereby intensifying the feeling of disappointment of the members of the Union. The secretary welcomes Obi and highlights his brilliant performance. Obi's words are full of lofty idealism: "Education for services, not for white-collar jobs and comfortable salaries. With our great country on the threshold of Independence, we need men who are prepared to serve her well and truly" (*No Longer at Ease* p.29)

Achebe harps on the generation gap between parents and children. Obi's father, Isaac explains

why he rejects the Osu girl, Clara. Isaac thinks that by marrying a non-Christian, Obi shall break the moral order in the family and his marriage will bring the curse for posterity: "Osu is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg you, my son, not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and your children's children unto the third and fourth generations will curse your memory. It is not for myself I speak; my days are few. You will bring sorrow on your head and on the heads of your children. Who will marry your daughters? Whose daughters will your sons marry? Think of that my son. We are Christians, but we cannot marry our own daughters" (*No Longer at Ease* p.121)

Obi's mother suffers a rude jolt when she listens to his decision of marrying Clara. She relates a bad dream in which she experienced white termites on her bed. She states "I saw the meaning of my death in the dream. If you want to marry this girl, you must wait until I am no more" (*No Longer at Ease* p.123). In breathless succession she says, "But if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head because I shall kill myself" (*No Longer at Ease* p.123)

Achebe projects his protagonist with an outlook, which is totally detached. One of the patients waiting in the queue in the Doctor's clinic becomes angry with Obi for his jumping the queue and exclaims indignantly, "Beast of no nation" (*No Longer at Ease* p.138). In another context, Mr. Green, who happens to be Obi's boss becomes critical of the African officials who misuse the facility of local leave.

The blunders which Obi commits at various stages of his life are revealed through the words of the narrator:

"The chief result of the crisis in Obi's life was that it made him examine critically for the first time the main spring of his actions. And in doing so he uncovered a good deal that he could only regard as sheer humbug. Take this matter of twenty pounds every month to his town union, which in the final analysis was the root cause of all his troubles. Why had he not swallowed his pride and accepted the four month's exemption which he had been allowed, albeit, with a bad grace? Could a person in his

position afford that kind of pride? Was it not a common saying among his people that a man should not out of pride and etiquette, swallow his phlegm?" (*No Longer at Ease* p.141)

It was Obi's moral duty to attend his mother's funeral but instead of doing that, he sends home whatever money he has. An elderly person, an old member of the Umuofia Progressive Union calls Obi, like father like son. Just as Issac had not turned up for the funeral ceremony of his father, Okonkwo, in the similar fashion, Obi skipped the burial ceremony of his mother. The old member recollects in verbatim the words of Issac: "Those who kill with the matchet must die by the matchet" (*No Longer at Ease* p.145). Critic Khayyoom in his book, *Chinua Achebe* finds Obi insincere to both traditions ----- pre-colonial and Christian: "Obi proves himself fickle, unassertive and lacking in strong affiliation to either of the traditions" (*Chinua Achebe* p.61)

The idealist in Obi which was always in the sub conscious strata of his mind, dies with the death of his mother. He arrives at a new level of peace which thrusts him to his doom. Obi starts accepting bribes from girls that are eligible for scholarship. He also indulges in carnal pleasure with such girls. His sense of guilt reminds him of the example of King David of the Old Testament who declined food when his son was sick but washed and ate when he breathed his last.

By the time we reach the last chapter we find Obi guiltless in his new dispensation. The imagery of a snake casting off its slough fits in admirably with the guiltless consciousness of Obi. He was feeling like a brand-new snake just emerged from its slough". The narrators observation is point devise: "He no longer felt guilt. He, too had died and beyond death there are no ideals and no humbug, only reality" (*No Longer at Ease* p.151). His former idealism makes him to wake up at mid-night hours and he starts shouting "Terrible... This is terrible" (*No Longer at Ease* p.153)

The narrator sums up the story of Obi: "everybody wondered why. The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how an educated young man and so on and so forth. The British councilmen, even the men of Umuofia, did

not know and we must presume that in spite of his certitude, Mr. Green did not know either" (*No Longer at Ease* p.154).

The story of Obi is unfolded in nineteen chapters. But Achebe, instead of following a linear narration adopts the method of flashback. The observation of David Carroll hits the mark: "Obi realizes that although the ramshackle structure of his life has been dismantled he cannot return to its origin. Now more than ever is he no longer at ease here in the old dispensation" (*Chinua Achebe* p.81)

C.L. Innes in his book, *Chinua Achebe* makes a trenchant remark pertaining to the shaping of his consciousness by his education as well as the shaping of his consciousness by oral tradition (both Ogbo and Christian). Innes states that Achebe's second novel contrasts "The literary consciousness of its chief protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, with the consciousness formed by oral tradition (both Igbo and Christian) of his parents and the majority of his society. Obi is unable to bridge the gap between these two kinds of consciousness" (*Chinua Achebe* p.150)

It is amusing to see how Obi's story though centred in the capital city of Nigeria, Lagos, is structured around a series of journeys. Each of these journeys takes Obi as well as the reader to a complex understanding of the culture which has formed Obi. It also shows the point to which he has grown away from it.

The first is his journey from Umuofia to Lagos. The second journey is his voyage back from England to Lagos. The third and fourth journeys are his important trips back to Umuofia. The difference between the third and the fourth journeys marks the change that comes about in the thought process of Obi. Achebe describes these journeys efficaciously.

Achebe's novel harps on the corruption which is prevalent not only in contemporary Nigeria but is also universal in its manifestation. This is a point which becomes truly authentic in the words of the critic, Robert M. Wren: "Through the grandson of Okonkwo, the novel becomes a parable of modern Nigeria, a commentary on apparently universal corruption and on the colonial judgement

of the new African generation". (*Achebe's World* p.38)

Achebe focalizes the character of Obi by the focalization of his own ideals and failures. Obi is presented as a person incapable of standing up to pressure and the criticism of the people. Obi could have retrieved himself by taking decisive steps based on moral principles as the be-all and end-all of his life, he submits himself to corrupt ways.

Obi opposes the temptation of bribery in the initial stages of his bureaucratic career. But later, encircled by pessimism, created by both pressures from his family and society, he yields to corruption. The remark of Bernth Lindfors in *Power above Powers* hits the mark: "Thereby perpetuating the tradition of public corruption he had earlier so despised" (*Power above Powers*, 65). Achebe demonstrates Obi as an individual pulled between the Igbo oral tradition of his forefathers and the Christian culture which both his father Issac and he had embraced. Obi is not willing to give up either of them.

Lindfors expounds his views on the African who changes from traditional rural culture to westernized urban culture such a person confronts a serious problem ----- the problem of higher education. The values of such an individual are so confused that he does not know which of the two alternative courses of action he should choose.

Achebe believes that the new nations in the African continent are afflicted by certain ills and one of the gravest ills is a confusion of values. Achebe's purpose is to show how the new African societies have lost both social and cultural values. Obi has not only confused his old and new values but he also fails to bring a new vision despite his western education.

Achebe's notions have been endorsed by the critic Margaret E Turner who in her research article entitled, "*Achebe Hegel and the New Colonialism*" writes: "Obi's lack of any system of value, and of religion ----- either the ancient belief of her ancestors which once gave meaning to the empty rituals his clansmen now perform, on the Christianity of the convert whose story Achebe does not tell, make him vulnerable in both societies. Obi is actually

between cosmologies, unattached and at ease in neither" (*Kunapipi* Vol. XII, No.2. 1990 p.37).

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