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## ACHEBE'S *NO LONGER AT EASE*: IRONY AND AMBIVALENCE IN THE HEART OF 'DARKNESS'

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### ABSTRACT

Culture and identity are the two interrelated terms and can shape one another. Colonialism is one important historical event for the confrontation of two cultures. Nigeria is also a place with a colonial background that results in the formation of an ambivalent and hybrid identity in the heart of 'darkness.' Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, a sequel to his *Things Fall Apart*, deals with the problems of this hybrid identity formations of the two generations of Okonkwo family belonging to the Igbo community in Eastern Nigerian. The case of Okonkwo family is an example through which Achebe has shown the general transformation of the cultural identity of various tribal communities in general and of the Igbo Community in particular in Nigeria. The protagonist of the novel is Obi Okonkwo, a western-educated young chap, who belongs to the category of a second generation Christian convert in Nigeria. His father Issac Okonkwo is a first generation convert and is wholly contemptuous of his origin and culture. Unlike his father, Obi returns to his country after the completion of his education, and although he pays some tribute to his own culture, he goes to cure its 'corruption' as a 'cultured and civilized' human being, but himself ironically appears to be the most corrupted person as a bribe taker at the end. However, in this context, the paper tries to explore the irony and ambivalence related to the 'whiteness' and 'darkness' at the heart of the Africans, applying the theories of Bhabha and Fanon.

**Keywords:** Culture, Identity, Hybridity, Ambivalence, Darkness

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### INTRODUCTION

If Ogbuefi Okonkwo is the hero in *Things Fall Apart*, then Obi Okonkwo is the antihero of *No Longer at Ease*. Things have really fallen apart in the Igbo society, and a cultural transformation has occurred due to European colonial mission in Africa, but in what way we need to probe. Obi is preeminently a man of words and books, and he is the product of the European missionary education. Although he is invested with western individualism

and pragmatism, he still retains some of his ancestral traits. Ogbuefi is the grandfather of Obi, but the grandson differs from the grandfather to a great extent. Ogbuefi Okonkwo was the man of action, even sometimes of violent action. He lived by the sword and perished by the sword, and his sword would speak more than his lips. He had a slight stammer, and whenever he got angry, he could not get his words out quickly, rather used his fists (Achebe 2). Obi, on the other hand is a man, not of

action but of words, whose downfall is precipitated by his inability to act. To the Igbo society, Obi seems somewhat unfamiliar, because he is presented throughout the text in terms of his relation to books, and indeed his perception of the world and his attempt to make sense of his lived experience, or 'exegesis' as Achebe calls it, are pervasively literary and idealistic. Achebe, in this novel, displays the colonial encounter with the indigenous people of Nigeria, which results in the formation of a hybrid cultural identity that is constantly unstable, lingering between the two contours, and creating a 'no longer at ease' all the time. Bhabha calls this place a "third space of enunciation" for the subject (Bhabha 37), and indeed the subject here comes at a juncture of different itinerant cultural routes. The title is taken from T S Eliot's "Journey of the Magi," which creates a sense of alienation. As Fanon says, western imperial education during the colonial encounter creates 'inferiority complex' among the natives, and lead them to neglect their indigenous cultural heritage and to embrace white values. Christianity and missionary education were the tools of exploitation and the deracination of the native people by the colonizers. The first generation converts, being intoxicated with the colonial value-system, surrendered themselves to the colonial ideology and became blind imitators of the white men. Issac Okonkwo, Obi's father, is an example of the first generation converts, and there are several instances in the text of his passive imitation of white values. As a Christian, Issac refuses to have a second wife in polygamy society of Nigeria, and he also challenges his people when they say that the great Okonkwo (Ogbuefi Oknokwo) has reappeared in the form of Obi. He even criticizes the believers in the chief-rain-maker. Issac abandons his father, his tradition, and his people for the sake of Christianity, and refers to other non-Christian Ibos as heathen. He does not allow his wife and children to eat anything in the neighbor house. When a neighbor offered a piece of yam to Obi, he refused to accept it, saying "We don't eat heathen food" (Achebe 45). He considers Nigerian folktales as heathen rites, and orders his wife Hannah not to teach them to their children. As a loyal wife, Hannah also joined the church with her children after her husband's death,

but her unconscious dream of the white termites devouring the bed right under her brings out her repressed African fertility and continuity which were threatened to destruction under white supremacy. Hence, she says:

I dreamt a bad dream, a very bad dream one night. I was lying on a bed spread with white cloth and I felt something creepy against my skin. I looked down on the bed and found that swarm of white termites had eaten it up, and the mat and the white cloth. Yes, termites had eaten up the bed right under me. (Achebe 102)

However for the second generation converts, things slightly differ, and the heart of darkness includes some ambivalence in it. Obi is a second generation converts, and he is pruned with the literary modernism of European canon. His childhood also relates to the 'book.' Hence, these European education and values constitute the germ of his cultural transformation and alienation, and betrayal of his parents' world, and that too in an ambivalent way. This issue will be discussed further, applying Bhabha's theories of hybridity, mimicry, ambivalence and others.

#### **Bhabha's Theory of Ambivalence and Hybridity**

Homi Bhabha is a leading voice in postcolonial studies, and he is highly influenced by the Western poststructuralists like Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault. He argues against the West's tendency to essentialize the Third World Countries into a homogenous block, and claims that all sense of nationhood is narrativized and discursively constructed. In *The Location of Culture*, he states:

The linear equivalence of event and idea that historicism proposes, most commonly signifies a people, a nation, or a national culture as an empirical sociological category or a holistic cultural entity. However, the narrative and psychological force that nationness brings to bear on cultural production and political projection is the effects of the ambivalence of the nation as a narrative strategy. (140)

He made a major contribution to postcolonial studies by pointing out how there is always an ambivalence at the site of colonial dominance. In

*The Location of Culture*, Bhabha introduces the concepts of mimicry, hybridity, liminality, influenced by the semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis. According to Bhabha, colonialism is not simply a straightforward oppression, domination, and violence, but is a complex and varied cultural contact and interaction in which the cultural meanings and identity of not only the colonized, but also of the colonizers can be constructed, and can undergo transformation. Interestingly, he also highlights how the West is troubled by its 'doubles' - or the East, meaning that the East forces the West to explain its own identity and to justify its rational self-image. Bhabha states that the domination of the colonized depends on the assertion of difference that the colonized are inferior to the colonizers. But, he believes that the colonizers know that this supposed difference is undermined by the real sameness of the colonized population, and this tension between the illusion of difference and the reality of the sameness leads to an anxiety which opens the gap in the colonial discourse - a gap that can be exploited by the colonized as a mode of resistance, a peaceful resistance in fact. Bhabha recognizes the importance of language in this process, and develops a linguistic model of anti-colonial struggle agency. In *The Location of Culture*, a collection of his important essays, Bhabha uses a series of concepts that work to undermine the simple polarization of the world into 'Self' and 'Other' binary. Influenced by Derrida, Bhabha attacks against the Western production and implementation of certain binaries like centre/margin, civilized/savage, and enlightened/ignorant, and proceeds to destabilize these binaries, as the first term of the binary is always allowed to uncritically dominate the second. Once these binaries are destabilized, cultures can interact, transgress and transform each other in a more complex way, thus producing the hybrid form. Purely discrete and authentic cultural identity is hardly possible, and the locus of two cultures meeting, or the 'luminal' in Bhabha's term, creates an in-betweenness. In fact, not only Bhabha's work, but postcolonial studies in general are preoccupied with these concepts of hybridity, mimicry, in-betweenness, crossing over borders, and others. In

his book *Colonial Desires: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and race*, Robert Young says:

A hybrid is technically a cross between two different species and that therefore the term hybridization evokes both the botanical notion of inter-species grafting and the 'vocabulary of the Victorian extreme right' which regarded different races as different species (qtd in Loomba 10)

In this case, Young refers to the term hybridity as a cross between two different species, but he further states that it is both a botanical notion as well as an inter-species grafting. Drawing upon this connotation of inter-species grafting, Bhabha's theory of hybridity can be explained by referring to Ania Loomba's book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*:

It is Homi Bhabha's usage of the concept of hybridity that has been the most controversial within recent postcolonial studies. Bhabha goes back to Fanon to suggest that liminality and hybridity are necessary attributes of the colonial conditions. For Fanon, you will recall, psychic trauma results when the colonial subject realizes that he can never attain the 'whiteness' he has been taught to desire, and neither he can wholly shed the blackness that he has learnt to devalue. Bhabha amplifies this, in order to suggest that the colonial identities are always a matter of flux and agony, and It is always, as Bhabha writes in an essay about Fanon's importance of our time in relation to the place of the other that colonial desire is articulated, correct. (174)

Bhabha rejects Fanon's idea that colonial authority works simply by inviting black subjects to mimic white culture. Rather, he states that this invitation itself undercuts colonial hegemony. In *The Location of Culture*, he says ". . . mimicry emerges as a repetition of difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (86). Both the colonizers and the colonized are not only present together, but also act on one another, and there are reversible reactions between them. Here comes Bhabha's notion of mimicry, or rather colonial mimicry, and he defines it in this following way:

Colonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed recognizable Other, as a subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an ambivalence; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excesses, its differences. (Bhabha 86)

So, colonial mimicry is not a slavish imitation or complete assimilation, but is an exaggerated copying of language, culture, manners and ideas, and it is stricken by an indeterminacy. In short, it is a sort of civil-disobedience, and suggests a repetition with difference instead of a colonized's servitude. It is a form of mockery on the part of the colonized, and the comic quality of mimicry is vital because it undermines the ongoing pretensions of superiority of the colonizers and their 'solemn' purpose to educate and improve the colonized. It is, moreover, a resistive response to the circulation of stereotypes. Moreover, Bhabha was influenced by the Freudian concept of uncanny to explain his theories of hybridity, and postcolonial perspective. The German word 'Das Unheimliche' is translated as 'unhomely' or 'un-housedness,' and it denotes a feeling of inspiring uneasiness, unfamiliarity, and strangeness, and again it is essentially an involuntary recurrence of the old or familiar. This is how the uncanny itself cherishes an ambivalent quality like that of mimicry. Also the important fact is that culture too contains this uncanny nature in itself, and that is why Bhabha says that culture has a dual identity - it is homely, asserting its coherence and stability, and other hand, it is unhomely because it is always changing, and is drawn into a displaced relationship with other cultures. It can be well assumed that migrants can best exemplify the dual nature of culture, because they are always situated in relation to both an original culture and a new location.

#### **Hybridity and Ambivalence in *No Longer At Ease***

However, Achebe, in *No Longer at Ease*, has shown a plethora of the instabilities of identity which are the necessary and inevitable consequence of colonialism as Bhabha suggested. The central character, that is, Obi's identity has been shaped by African and European cultures, and he is the true

representative of the hybrid identity. Achebe has shown here a play on words on Obi and Ibo which are anagrammatic. Obi is the man from the Ibo tribe, and his mother tongue is Ibo. But as his name displays, he is an altered form of his pre-colonial self. In a word, Obi is an Ibo, but not without a radical transformation of the original. That Obi is a hybrid-self has ample evidence in the text. After Obi returns to Umuofia to attend his graduation ceremony, he hears the tribal folkloric songs of the traders on the wagon. Although he had heard these songs many times before his departure for England, he now gets a new feeling listening to them, and translates them into English in his mind and immediately realizes that the English translation of these songs helps him to understand the meanings of them for the first time. He is also struck by the wealth of association that even such a mediocre song could have (Achebe 36). This occasion confirms that Obi, as a postcolonial man, requires the language of the colonizers in order to understand himself, his identity, and his culture. Even though the song is mixture of English and Nigerian language, it is easy to understand for a person with a hybrid identity. The hybrid nature of the postcolonial self is found, not only in Obi, but in other educated and elite people of Nigeria. For example, the UPU members take pride and pleasure in speaking full and formal English, although their English is, in many ways, different from the English Obi finds in England. Also in many parts of Umuofia and in other places of Nigeria, this intermingling of English and Nigerian culture is shown, as is evident in the text. When the village is holding a celebratory feast on the occasion of Obi's return, they serve the kola nut, a typical Nigerian tribal food, but that too in a Christian way, and thereby paying tribute to both the cultures. Obi expresses his nostalgic feelings about Nigeria in English and in a poetic genre which belongs to English literature, and he finds his nostalgic poems about Nigeria in A E Houseman's book of poetry.

He looked along the selves a number of times without deciding what to read. Then his eye rested on A. E Houseman's Collected Poems. [ . . . ] He opened the book where a piece of paper was showing, its top frayed and

browned from exposure to dust. On it was written a poem called "Nigeria." (Achebe 78)

### **Bourgeois National Consciousness and Anti-colonial Resistance**

However, this cultural transformation and hybridity did not prove altogether blissful for the natives who were not elite intellectuals - those intellectuals who positioned themselves in the posts vacated by the colonial masters, and became as oppressive, exploitative, and exclusive as the colonial masters. The power struggle between the colonial master and the native subject ends with political independence, but this soon reemerges, like the return of the repressed, in a different form, and announces the power-struggle between the elites and the rest in the postcolonial nation-state. The national consciousness and the anti-colonial resistance, that wake in the aftermath of independence, function in three stages – first the native intellectual is influenced by the colonizer's culture, and seeks to emulate and assimilate it by abandoning his own and trying to be as white as possible, as is the case with Obi's father in the novel; secondly the native discovers that he cannot become white enough, so as to be treated equally with the colonial masters, and hence he returns to study his own culture, and romanticizes his pre-colonial past; and thirdly he becomes truly anti-colonial, joining the ranks of his people and battling against colonial domination. But Fanon suggests that this return to the pre-colonial past did not guarantee the well-being of the working class or benefit the oppressed. In his *The Wretched of the Earth*, he says "the national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement" (152). Obi, as a representative of such society, disregards the African values, and raises his voice against the corruption of the old Nigerian men, saying "the public service of Nigeria would remain corrupt until the old Africans at the top were replaced by young men from the universities" (Achebe 31). But ironically at the end, Obi becomes the most corrupted person who takes a fat bribe which puts him on trial. Undoubtedly, his education led him to commit such a heinous crime, but the judge and the European community cannot comprehend "how a young man of your education and brilliant promise

could have done this" (Achebe 4). Indeed, like Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Obi plays the role of a black Kurtz, a hollow man, between whose idea and reality falls the shadow of the word. Obi's case is more than losing touch with his family, culture, and his mother tongue, but rather it implies the total acquisition of white values – pragmatic devotion, efficiency and utilitarian motives, which find its baldest expression in the crucial episode of his not attending his mother's funeral:

What was the point of going to Umuofia? She would have been buried by the time he got there, anyway . . . Obi wondered whether he had done the right thing in not setting out for Umuofia yesterday. But what could have been the point in going? It was more useful to send all the money he could for the funeral instead of wasting it on petrol get home. (Achebe 122)

### **Conclusion**

Throughout the novel, Achebe has referred to several myths, folktales, and proverbs of African world, and has associated Africa's darkness with community, fertility and life. But it is a misfortune that the direction in which Obi and some other people of their community travel in their life is from the fertile black seed to the sterile and isolated white one, which ultimately leads to death. Obi's name Obiajulu - "the mind at last is at rest" – (Achebe 8) utters the same feelings. The Conradian 'Heart of Darkness,' therefore gradually, involves some 'whiteness' in itself at the cost of losing its original (and fertile) 'Darkness,' and herein lies the ambivalence – the ambivalence of 'Darkness.'

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