
Past and Present in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract:

This paper takes as its goal the demonstration of Achebe's method in establishing the variations between the African and European ways. "No Longer at Ease" explores the decadence of modern urban environment which is contrasted with the idea of rural piety and stability. The paper provides an analysis of various instances which point to this opposition and renders Achebe's position of siding with tradition and even manifesting nostalgia for the past. The conclusion is that the novel can be seen as a display of the conflict between the desire to retain traditional values and the recognition that change and assimilation are absolutely necessary for survival.

Key words: African literature, Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*

INTRODUCTION

Broadly speaking, Achebe was born in Eastern Nigeria, in an area first colonized by the British at the end of the nineteenth

century. He obtained outstanding results at school and after graduating from university he became involved in journalism and writing. His interests include: the conflict between tradition and modernity, Christian history, African traditional religions, and so on. His first novel "*Things Fall Apart*" has been translated into more than fifty languages and has achieved the status of archetypal modern African novel in English with many critics hailing Achebe as "*the father of African fiction.*" (Booker & Gikandi 54) It was followed two years later by "*No Longer at Ease*" (1960), "*Arrow of God*" (1964) and "*A Man of the People*" (1966). These novels are concerned with traditional Igbo life as it clashed with colonial powers in the form of missionaries and colonial government. These early writings were also programmatic novels of nationalist self-assertion that interrogate the Eurocentric assumptions of colonial writing on Africa.

His deconstruction of Joseph Conrad's "*Heart of Darkness*" is also to be noted as its impact was so huge that nowadays Conrad criticism is divided into two stages:

Before and after Achebe. "*No Longer at Ease*" was 1960 sequel to Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*; it was the story of Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of the protagonist in *Things Fall Apart*. Obi had the opportunity and fortune to study in Britain and in the process was more removed from his African roots. At times it was similar to American novels of the turn-of-the-century in which the main character, usually a young woman, left her home for a bigger city and was confronted by opposition - like Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*. It was Achebe's second novel initially envisioned by the author as forming one final section of a single book. *No Longer At Ease* was about an African man who attended a university in London and his life after that and his conflicts when choosing what was right and what was wrong and how the western culture had changed his morals and values from the morals and values from the tribe he grew up in. The book took place in Nigeria right before Nigeria earned its

independence from England. It helped show the new culture he had learned clash with the African culture from his past.

In the end that section and the projected preliminary one evolved into two separate novels. The preliminary section became Achebe's first novel, *"Things Fall Apart"*, while the final section became *"No Longer at Ease"*, published in 1960, the year of Nigerian independence. *"No Longer at Ease"* formed a kind of sequel to *"Things Fall Apart"* but was set during a period just prior to independence that was, not one but two generations after the period treated in *"Things Fall Apart"*. Although the second novel had not gained as large an audience as the first one it deserved acclaim as an influential, finely written and engaging work. The extraordinary effect of reading both should be noted. *"No Longer at Ease"* traced the long term impact of British colonialism in West Africa, dramatized social and economic dilemmas still facing modern Africa and had helped laid a vital part of the stylistic as well as thematic groundwork for important works of African literature that had followed. The book opened with the trial of Michael Obi ajulu Okonkwo, referred to as Obi throughout the novel, who was accused of having accepted a twenty pound bribe. Then it jumped back in time to provide an account of how Obi ended up in that position. Thus, we found out that he had been the recipient of a scholarship to study in England and that, following his return he took a job as a civil servant. Obi had a radical position against corruption and he firmly believed in the young generation.

A detail to be noticed was that the protagonist was the son of Nwoye, now Isaac Okonkwo, therefore the grandson of the central character in *"Things Fall Apart"*.

A series of unfortunate events, among which a failed romantic relationship, the death of his mother and a poor management of resources, all transform Obi and lead to his accepting bribes in a reluctant acknowledgement that it was the way of the world he lived in. This 1960 sequel to Achebe's

Things Fall Apart was the story of Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of the protagonist in *Things Fall Apart*. Obi had the opportunity and fortune to study in Britain and in the process was more removed from his African roots. At times it similar to American novels of the turn-of-the-century in which the main character, usually a young woman, left her home for a bigger city and was confronted by opposition - like Dreiser's *Sister Carrie*.

Achebe deserved all the acclaim he had received: both as a crucial documentarian of Nigerian history and for his unflinching and poetic narration. His commitment to vivid and rational characters places him, in nearly all of his works, at the top of literary technique. Furthermore, Achebe's unique cross-lingual, cross-cultural dissemination through in-text dialogue and cross-disciplinary explanation highlight his skill as a historian who had felt the devastating effects of colonialism in Africa.

No Longer at Ease could be seen autobiographical in nature. It brought awareness to African society, when their countries specifically Nigeria were going through a transition period, a period in which Nigeria, along with 17 other African nations, were about to get back their independence from Great Britain. The writer explained the complexity of the situation, as it was very delicate. An average African man needed to be mentally strong enough to take the governance back in his hands. But tragic problems like corruption, bribery and loss of African values interfered with a man like Obi. Obi, a young man with the appropriate tools such as a foreign education, could bring about a change for the better. But as the story progressed, his illusions were transformed into disillusionment.

Achebe clearly stated the difference between tradition versus progress, and the divided society of Nigeria on the basis of caste, race, language and religion. Obi was trapped between the tradition, and the new ways of the west. Obi ended up being caught taking bribes of 20 pounds to repay back his debts. This

novel truly brought out awareness to the African society about the deep penetration of colonialism and the ways it had negatively affected them. Achebe put colonialism on trial in the name of Africa.

A NATION-BUILDING NOVEL

This novel was relevant to the building of a nation and it traced Obi's course in life as he failed to fulfill his own vision of personal and governmental integrity. Thus, Achebe presented us a number of forces allied against the building of a future strong nation. In particular these forces undermined a sense of unity, as in the narrow factionalism to which one pompous speaker paid tribute at a UPU meeting: *"Every town and village struggles at this momentous epoch in our political evolution to possess that of which it can say: 'This is mine'".* (Achebe 36)

Later, in the same scene, the narrator almost explicitly condemned the self-centeredness of the national outlook: *"In Nigeria the government was 'they.' It had nothing to do with you or me. It was an alien institution and people's business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble"* (Achebe 37)

This selfish outlook clearly overlapped with the acceptance and practice of official corruption that the novel explored. From the very beginning, that was in the opening scene alone, we were told that civil servants frequently paid bribes to obtain a doctor's certificate of illness for the day so that they might leave work and hear the verdict in Obi's bribery trial. The writer showed that the problem lied not entirely in corrupt practices but in the wide social acceptance of corruption. In *"No Longer at Ease"* official corruption was only one manifestation of the decadence that was tied to the modern urban environment. Contrasted with the idea of urban decadence and volatility was the idea of rural piety and stability. The conflict tradition versus modernity also translates

CAMPU: *Tradition versus Modernity in Chinua Achebe's "No Longer at Ease"* as the conflict between rural values and urban ones. Among the attractions of the city depicted in "*No Longer at Ease*" are cultural sophistication and variety, sexual freedom, and the availability of glamorous consumer items. The musical and erotic allure of the Lagos night club scene was strongly evoked in the novel. "*No Longer at Ease*" also considered the seductiveness and the psychological and moral effects of desiring and acquiring expensive consumer items. Achebe views these matters from multiple angles. Obi's evening with Clara and friends at a Lagos nightclub, "*The Imperial*", abounds in sexual insinuation and longing, and the author evokes a vital beauty in the atmosphere, especially in the high life music and dancing; this scene of real and potential erotic license, in which dance partners are interchangeable, was then followed shortly by Obi's nearly sexual encounter with Nora a young teacher from Ireland. This was the first token of his fragile loyalty to Clara. Prior to these events and almost immediately after he was appointed to his government post, Obi acquired a new Morris Oxford automobile, which became a focal point of Achebe's questioning of the materialism and uneven economic development that were associated with an urban, capitalist economy. Obi really could not afford this car and its many related expenses (he even hired, for a time, a chauffeur), but he considered neither delaying its acquisition nor selling it when his debt took on alarming proportions. In this and other respects he found himself in the position of so many people in consumer cultures: unable to live without debts despite the fact that he had made so much money. This disproportion symbolized by Obi's car, was regarded as unhealthy for the future independent nation, which required unity rather than leaders who used its wealth and formal education only to set themselves apart from the rest of the people. All this was suggested when someone waiting in a long

line to see a doctor yells at Obi a telling rebuke in Pidgin for forcing himself ahead of the others:

“You think because Government give you car you fit do what you like? You see all of we de wait here and you just go in... Foolish man. He think so because him get car so therefore he can do as he like. Beast of no nation!” (Achebe 173)

“*No Longer At Ease*” reminded the reader of the immense gap existing between the few rich people and the multitude of the poor. This gap was highlighted in the second chapter when the writer juxtaposed the slum area in Lagos, where there was poverty but also a rich social mosaic, with the city's luxurious Ikoyi district. The building in which Obi lives was in that district. In order to emphasize further the dubious quality of urban hierarchy, it was later revealed that whereas he, a highly successful African in the senior civil service, lived in this building, all its other occupants were only “*unimportant Europeans on the lower rungs of the service*”. Achebe questioned the social exclusiveness signified by Ikoyi by likening it to “*a graveyard*” while characterizing the Lagos mainland, which included the slums, as “*a bazaar*” and as a palm-nut kernel, “*shiny black and alive*”(Achebe 20) However the author could not be accused of glamorizing the lives of the poor in the city, as was evident in his description of the slum, with its “*wide-open storm drain from which came a very strong smell of rotting flesh from the remains of a dog which had no doubt been run over by a taxi*” and its “*nights oilman... trailing clouds of putrefaction*” (Achebe 17-18). *Bulletin of the Transylvania University of Brasov* • Series IV • Vol. 6 (55) No.2 – 2013 Further, at the end of the scene set in a Lagos nightclub, the writer presented the realities of urban blight and again of social division in relation to Obi's car. When returning to it after dancing, Obi and Clara found that the fifty pounds in cash that was temporarily in the glove box has been stolen by the “*half-clad little urchins*” whom they encountered when they parked the car earlier that

evening. One child sought, perhaps on behalf of his group, a three pence tip for looking after the car, but "*in principle Obi never gave anything to these juvenile delinquents*" (Achebe, "*No Longer at Ease*" 126).

The connection between Obi's car and the poverty of the children was not arbitrary. Rather, it might be read as one of the novel's cautionary notes concerning freedom and prosperity: these could not be enjoyed for long, either by the individual or the nation, if the poor were ignored.

RURAL VERSUS URBAN COMMUNITY

Achebe was not unjust though as he admitted to the merits of the city. It was through the work the city offers to migrants from Obi's home district of Umuofia that they were able to collect enough money to establish the scholarship that provided him with an education in England an education that they believed would benefit them (especially if Obi became a lawyer) as well as Obi. The city was the source of other, government sponsored university scholarships (including ones to England), and the benefits of such an education and of university education in general are undeniable:

"It was rather sheer hypocrisy to ask if a scholarship was as important as all that or if university education was worth it. Every Nigerian knew the answer. It was yes. A university degree was the philosopher's stone" (Achebe 105)

However, there were so few university scholarships as compared to the demand that men and women were willing to resort to monetary bribery, and some women offer their bodies, to obtain them. From this angle one problem with urban modernity in Africa was not the economic and educational opportunities themselves, but rather the scarcity of such opportunities. Such scarcity made it rather likely that a person in Obi's position would fall into debt. Despite having found a

relatively well-paid job in Lagos, he was still bound by strong kinship affiliations, so the fewer the number of well-played positions, the greater the portion of his income would go to family members. One should also note the novel's descriptions of women wanting to obtain a scholarship by offering themselves to Obi who was in the position of helping them. It was another way of presenting the city as the site of immorality and decadence while the rural countryside was regarded as the site of virtues. An obvious contrast in this respect was offered by the singing. The only music in the city that the author depicts was that of the Imperial nightclub. The licentious nature of that music was reflected in its suggestive lyrics and in the rather lewd dancing it inspired. On the contrary, in Iguego, when Obi left for England the Christian community members sang religious songs, while when he returned a group of non-Christian women perform a song teaching a moral lesson the need to cherish the members of one's family and place them before material wealth. *He that has a brother must hold him to his heart, for a kinsman cannot be bought in the market, neither is a brother bought with money... He who has brothers has more riches than buy.* (Achebe 129).

A. CAMPU: *Tradition versus Modernity in Chinua Achebe's "No Longer at Ease"* Therefore, the simple virtues associated with the countryside and the people there were highlighted by the singing of both Christian and non Christian songs. Another contrast between the city and the country was presented by the scenes with the pillowcases. When he was about twenty one, Obi visited Lagos for the first time, traveling the 500 miles from Iguedo, his rural Igbo village in Umuofia, to the city in order to take a plane to England for nearly four years of study. In Lagos he shared a room with his friend from school in Umuofia, Joseph, who worked in the city at that time. Obi was fascinated by the frank sexuality in *"this strange and sinful new world"* (Achebe 16) and when Joseph told him about a former girlfriend, he mentioned that she made the pillowcases

in his apartment. On one of these Joy sewed the word “*osculate*” in multicolored letters. This word on the pillowcase as well as the appearance of Joseph's current, unnamed female companion, whose dress and makeup highlight some of her physical attributes, leave “*a nasty taste in Obi's mouth*” (Achebe 17) On the other hand, when Obi was back in his room at his parents' home in Igedo four years later, he noticed the brand new white sheet and “*pillow-slips with their delicate floral designs*” which were “*no doubt Esther's work.*” He thought, “*Good old Esther!*” (Achebe 17) and remembered that she, his eldest sister, became a school teacher when Obi was a young child. These details, along with the devoutly Christian home, made the second allusion to a pillowcase standing in contrast to the previous one, a contrast that reinforced the novel's moral distinction between the urban and rural areas. The main conflict in “*Things Fall Apart*” between Africa and Europe and especially that between the Igbo and the British might appear to have turned in “*No Longer At Ease*” into the conflict between British imposed modernity (associated with the city) and African tradition (associated with the countryside). Achebe juxtaposed the two in pronounced ways, as it has been suggested previously, but the situation depicted in “*No Longer at Ease*” was more complex than the one from the first novel partly due to the legacy of Christianity among the Igbos. Whereas in the first novel Christian missionaries were closely allied with British administrators in the colonial effort to destroy Igbo traditions, Igbo Christians in the second novel both suppressed and sustained those traditions. The multifaceted role of these Christians demonstrated on the one hand, the long term success of missionary efforts, and, on the other hand, the endurance of Igbo culture. As a pillar of the Christian community in the district of Umuofia, Isaac Okonkwo had asserted the priority of the new faith over and against Igbo religion through much of his life. In his own family he had done so with the support of Hannah, who converted as an adult and

who *"sometimes showed more zeal than even her husband"* (Achebe 67).

Obi remembered that at the age of four he refused, like his older sisters, to accept a neighbor's gift, a result of their mother's teaching, but embarrassed the sisters by adding aloud that they never ate *"heathen food"*. (Achebe 67) Isaac did not rigidly dismiss all aspects of the culture that he was born into as Nwoye, thus permitting the traditional presentation of the kola nut to guests, as long as it was not sacrificed to idols. Adult Obi's faith, however, had weakened, and he wondered about the consequences of saying to Isaac, *"Father, I no longer believe in your God"*. (Achebe 65) In addition Obi *"used to wonder whether ...his mother would not have preferred telling her children the folk stories that her mother had told her."* (Achebe 67) *Bulletin of the Transilvania University of Braşov* • Series IV • Vol. 6 (55) No.2 – 2013.

Hannah had done so with her daughters before Obi was born, but later Isaac forbade the practice because such tales were for *"heathens...not for the people of the Church"* (Achebe 66). But Achebe showed that the oral tradition was not so easily forgotten. The prohibition against folk stories by Isaac who himself used Igbo proverbs was eventually breached by Hannah when she taught the young Obi a tale about the wicked leopardess in order that he could tell it to his class at school. The teacher encouraged the students to do so, and when Obi recounted the story he added some details of his own.

CONCLUSION

It can be noticed that Achebe manifested nostalgia for the past. Abdul Jan Mohamed says that: *"the protagonist ultimately falls not because he is alienated from society but because his character is ossified around certain traditional values."* (Janmohamed 168). His decline was due to the fact that his naïve idealism prevented him from adjusting to the practical

nature of a corrupt society. Obi's valorization of honesty and integrity represented a common aspiration of all cultures. But while Achebe criticized the ossification of his character he seemed to admire his values. While the protagonist's decline was due to his ossification, the society to which he belonged managed to survive because of its adaptability. The process of adaptation was a slow and painful one during which various aspects of indigenous and European cultures were combined during which the colonized had to look for synthesis. Colonialism inevitably produced in the colonized society a period of chaos during which old values no longer applied and the new ones had not yet been found. *No Longer at Ease* was a beautifully realized tug-of-war with a human being as the rope. Obi Okonkwo returned to Africa after being educated in England thinking that he pretty much knew who he was. The ease with which he defined himself was tested as soon as he got off the boat and began his new life. Obi was caught between white and black cultures, European and African mindsets, poverty versus affluence, family versus personal and even how a man dealt with women.

Thus, the novel could be seen as a display of the conflict between the desire to retain traditional values and the recognition that change and assimilation were absolutely necessary for survival.

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