

Colonial Representations in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract:

During the 19th century, England was undoubtedly a domineering global superpower on the basis of its enormous scientific advancement and vast colonial rule, affecting a marked majority of the world by destroying or considerably altering the local cultures and imposing their culture instead. In so doing, they actually created a culture of hatred, bias, and polarization, mainly based on misrepresentation, that is, over-representation of themselves and under-representation of the colonized. Accordingly, the aim of this paper was to find out as to how Chinua Achebe's novel No Longer at Ease (NLE) unveiled various colonial cultural representations of the colonized Nigerians as fabricated so systematically by the English colonizers. For this purpose, three major aspects of colonial representation, that is, alterity, stereotyping, and Eurocentrism, were mainly focused and delicately reviewed with reference to eminent postcolonial thinkers, theorists, and writers. Next, in light of the aforementioned selected aspects of the colonial representation, the relevant discourses of the colonizers from NLE were analyzed. Finally, it was concluded that the English colonizers represented the colonized Nigerians mainly by three lexemes of derogatory connotation, that is, slaves, corrupt, and uncultured, correspondingly resulting from discursive acts of alterity, stereotyping, and eurocentricing respectively, and that the representation of the colonized by derogatory lexemes, especially corrupt and uncultured, appears so much antithetical to reality.

Key words: alterity, colonial, colonized, colonizers, connotation, derogatory, Eurocentrism, postcolonial, representation, stereotyping

1. INTRODUCTION

In its very conception, colonialism refers to a power relationship commonly established by the military conquest. It is used synonymously with colonization, oppression, inequality, racism, and exploitation. As Nayar (2008) remarked, colonization “destroyed native cultures, or altered them significantly” (p. 3). Although colonialism, which was a way of settlement, is virtually over today, now has been replaced by imperialism, which is a way of “securing wealth and power through the continuing economic exploitation of other nations” (McLeod, 2007, p. 8); its typical examples being America and European Union today.

In the Victorian era, however, the British Empire was at the peak of its power, subjugating a considerable number of colonies, whereby growing in prosperity. Boehmer (1995) observed that “in the late Victorian age the projection of British authority abroad was particularly powerful and far-reaching” (p. 2), with the further remarks that “the English did not establish their power only through military force, but also by imposing British culture” (p. 13). Elaborating this point further, Ashcroft and Ahluwalia (2001) posited that “it is through culture that the assumption of the ‘divine right’ of imperial powers to rule is vigorously and authoritatively supported” (p. 85). Of course, it was mainly culture that helped quite a handful of British to control hundreds of millions natives throughout the world.

While imposing their own culture and destroying or significantly altering the local cultures of the colonized population, the British fabricated their own identities as well as of the colonized people in oppositional terms, particularly

under-representing the colonized by the use of such discursive practices, techniques, and tactics as othering, stereotyping, and Eurocentricing. Emphasizing the need of undoing these colonial cultural misrepresentations, Said (1993) suggested that “the job facing the cultural intellectual is . . . not to accept the politics of identity as given, but to show how all representations are constructed, for what purposes, by whom, and with what components” (p. 314). In somewhat similar terms, Foucault (as cited in Siddiqui, 2014) observed that “the distinguishing factor between powerful and powerless is discourse, for which a constant struggle is going on. Marginalised groups need to realize the central significance of discourse as a potential tool to shift the advantage in their favour” (p. 7).

In fact, as Ashcroft, Griffith, and Tiffin (2004) pointed out, “Post-colonialism (or often postcolonialism) deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies” (p. 167). Accordingly, Chinua Achebe, who is one of the most prolific and vocal cultural and postcolonial theorists and writers, titled by Panigrahi (2015) as “the cultural ambassador of Africa” (p. 162), performed his duty so ardently in his novels and TV interviews, that is, “He represents the voice of the marginalized ‘other’ – the Africans” (Abubaker, 2016, p. 5).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In his article with the very title “Representation”, Hall (1997) defined representation as “the production of meaning through language” (p. 28), thereby pointing out its scanty nature by the remarks that “there is no simple relationship of reflection, imitation or one to-one correspondence between language and the real world. The world is not accurately or otherwise reflected in the mirror of language” (p. 28). Illustrating this view in postcolonial terms, that is, by unveiling the representation of the colonised by the colonizers, Childs and

Williams (1997) cited Bhabha's claim that "the objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonised as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (p. 123). Colonizers believe that the natives are born with some inherent flaws. "They cannot represent themselves, they must be represented" (Child & William, 1997, p. 103). The aforementioned quotes clearly witnesses to the effect that the colonists had a racist perspective on the native inhabitants of the colonies, wherewith they indulged in misrepresenting the colonised by different derogatory terms through the use of different tactics, techniques, and practices, of which the most noticeable being *alterity*, *stereotyping*, and *Eurocentrism*.

Taking alterity first, it was practised by the colonists and the colonial writers in representing the colonized as less rational, thus referring to "difference and otherness" (Hawley, 2004, p. 16). Indeed, the English considered themselves not only different but also more rational and superior. Boehmer (1995) remarked that "the derogatory attitude of the colonists is termed "othering" (p. 79), which signifies that "colonised peoples were represented as lesser: less human, less civilised, as child or savage, wild man, animal or headless mass" (p. 79).

Next to take stereotyping, it refers to an overgeneralizing manner by which the colonial discourse holistically represents the colonized people in various derogatory terms. Siddiqui (2014) observed that although "stereotypes do not have any scientific origin, they play a very vital role in the thought process of a society" (p. 88). Critiquing the very nature of strereotyping, however, Bing and Bergvall (1996) emphasized that "the issue is not difference, but the denial of any differences within or across groups" (p. 88).

Finally, the derogatory view of the colonized by the colonizers gives birth to a very biased approach that Europe is the centre of all knowledge and wisdom. This self-centered

approach of the West, or *Eurocentrism*, refers to the conscious or unconscious process by which Europe and European cultural assumptions are constructed as, or assumed to be, the normal, the natural, or the universal. In simple terms, Eurocentrism may be defined as “the privileging of Western thought as universal” (Simonis, 2016, p. 7). Surprisingly, this mentality has been exploiting the whole world for as long as the last five centuries on the basis of the European, constructed knowledge and discourse about the *Orient*. Pointing to this fact, Parry (1987) cited Said's *Orientalism* that “power and discourse is possessed entirely by the colonizer” (p. 41).

3. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

All the above-mentioned issues are addressed very explicitly by Chinua Achebe's novels. *NLE* by Achebe (1987) even starts with the a number of illustrations of the White or English colonial presence, rather their dominance, in Nigeria in the late 1950's: “Mr. Justice William Galloway, Judge of the High Court of Lagos” (p. 1), “Mr. Green, his [Obi's] boss” and “The British Council man” (pp. 2-3); “many other Europeans in the bar” (p. 3), and “a European post in the Civil Service” (p. 6). We see that the key positions in Nigeria are held by the Europeans, that is, the English colonizers. They represent the archetypes of the colonial mindset, or the mindset of a master race, whereby treating and representing the colonized Nigerians in various lexical terms by observing alterity, stereotyping, and eurocentricing, illustrated by the analysis of the relevant colonial discourses from *NLE*, presented as under:

A. Slaves

For example, while ordering for beers, Mr. Green, one of the colonizers, orders for beer in the bar, referring to his colleague sitting beside him as “master: “One beer for this master” (p. 3), thus implying the use of the lexeme “slaves” for the colonized

Nigerians. This shows an act of Othering. By rendering their authority over the colonized, the colonizers make natives inferior. They looked down upon them. They fix [them] “with a gaze as a collector fixes his insect with formalin” (p. 1). Similarly, Mr. Justice William Galloway, a colonizer, insults and disgraces Mr. Adeyemi, the local lawyer, for being late and on making lame excuses. He says to him: “I am getting sick and tired of these constant excuses about the problem of locomotion” (p. 1). This is the typical tone of a master to his slave.

B. Corrupt

We see in the first chapter of *NLE* that Mr. Green, one of the typical English colonizers in Nigeria as well as Obi's boss, gives disgusting remarks by claiming that he is not surprised at Obi's behaviour because, according to him, “African is corrupt through and through” (p. 3). This stereotypical vein is further illustrated by Mr. Green's more elaborate remarks about the Africans: “They are all corrupt. I'm for all equality and all that. I for one would hate to live in South Africa. But equality won't alter facts” (p. 3). Characteristically, this is the language of the colonizers, that is, the language of power, arrogance, and superiority.

C. Uncultured

In *NLE*, English colonizers reflect their superiority and Eurocentric racism in their overall behaviour towards Obi and his people. Obi and his people, being native black Nigerians, are stereotyped by the White English colonizers. Rather, the English colonizers not only hate and stereotype the colonized Nigerian people, but they hate and stereotype each and every aspect of the colonized land. By contrast, however, they consider themselves as cultured and civilized. An obvious example of such a stereotypical and Eurocentric version of Africa, its climate, and its people, is reflected by the following remarks of Mr. Green:

. . . over countless centuries the African has been the victim of the worst climate in the world and every imaginable disease. Hardly his fault. But he has been sapped mentally and physically. We have brought him Western education. But what use is to him? (p. 3)

Such a belief, as highlighted in the above-given quote, that the West is the source of knowledge and that the best education lies with the West was so systematically established that the native, black Africans assimilated it and it became a part of their belief-system. For instance Obi is sent to by UPU to study law in England so that on return he will serve his people in a better way. Similarly, Obi's choice of English in England shows his belief in the authenticity of Eurocentric thought. Even almost all the colonized Nigerians hold a high opinion of education in England: "Obi's going to England caused a big stir in Umoufia" (p. 7). Mary, a zealous Christian in Umoufia and Obi's mother's friend tells the gathering at the occasion of Obi's departure to England "the life history of her friend's son [Obi] who was about to go to the place [England] where learning finally came to an end" (p. 8).

In fact, to establish their imperialistic thought and knowledge that they constructed about the orient or the colonized, the colonizers monopolized and constructed the whole culture. We are told in the first chapter of *No Longer at Ease* as how the local culture of Umoufia has been acculturated by the white colonizers. It is illustrated by the remarks of Mr. Samuel Ikedi (a local Nigerian) while addressing the gathering as to how wedding feasts had been steadily declining in the towns since the invention of the invitation cards. "Many of his hearers whistled in unbelief when he [Mr. Ikedi] told them that a man could not go to his neighbour's wedding unless he was given one of these papers" (p. 9).

But more than other cultural aspects, the English colonizers imposed even their so-called religious dogma over the local Christians out of their Eurocentric bias. In the first

chapter of the novel, we are informed that Obi's father, Isaac Okonkwo, is "a Christian convert", "in fact a catechist" (p. 6); whereas, we are also told that Christianity is the religion of the colonizers, in fact. This conflict of Christianity versus local religion is illustrated more clearly in chapter five of NLE. It is the occasion of Obi's arrival in Umoufia and there is a huge welcome. A person calls Obi's father to bring a kola nut for "this child's [Obi's] return", to which Obi's father Isaac replies, "This is a Christian house" (p. 46). On this reply another man intervenes, "A Christian house where kola nut is not eaten?" and then Isaac replies, "Kola nut is eaten here, but not sacrificed to idols" (p. 46). Afterwards, an elder wants to offer a kola nut, but Obi's father is against blasphemous offerings. So the kola nut is offered in a Christian fashion.

Above all other examples, we observe that even Obi, who obviously appears as against the colonial mind-set, appears wearing a "palm-beach suit" (p. 1) in the court during his trial at the start of the novel which depicts that he is copying his masters and wants himself to be identified among them than his own people. But the colonizers, despite his Western education and dressing, are not willing to accept him wholeheartedly. This shows that colonizers, during colonization, imposed their language and culture onto even the educated people they colonized. Rather, these educated natives anglicised themselves so much that they left even their own good values. This is illustrated through Obi's extreme hatred for corruption before the full adoption of the colonial culture. But in due course of time he falls a victim to the hypocritical colonial system. Ultimately, the Anglicized Obi realizes this folly in the trial scene. He evades the moment of his trial. "For three or four weeks Obi Okonkwo had been stealing himself against this moment" (p. 1). Afterwards, Obi is overcome by his feelings of remorse when the judge remarks about him so astonishingly: "I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this" (p. 2).

Although these words of the judge move Obi to realize his own self and his true identity, yet, at the same time, it exposes the hypocrisy of the colonizers. On the one hand, they claim not to have accepted bribe with an education like that and seem to disapprove it, as is evident from Mr. Green and his other English fellows' conversation: "We were talking about this young man [Obi] who took a bribe" (p. 4). But, on the other hand, they are themselves more corrupt than the natives. The Vice-President of UPU is quite convinced of the white men's corruption when he says to Obi: "You think white men don't eat bribes? Come to our department, they eat more than black men eat nowadays" (p. 30).

In fact, it is the Western education that makes Obi estranged from his own culture as well as getting at odds with the new culture like millions of other young people in Africa and Asia. On the one hand, they see all sorts of problems with the culture they have left behind; on the other hand, they aren't accepted by the Western culture they try to embrace and imbibe. This condition is what is known as "postcolonial identity" and Obi exhibits a classic case of it.

4. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis of NLE, it becomes evident that in NLE, the English colonizers represented the colonized Nigerians mainly in terms of three lexemes of derogatory nature, that is, slaves, corrupt, and uncultured, correspondingly resulting from the discursive colonial acts of alterity, stereotyping, and eurocentricing respectively. While employing these discursive acts, the colonizers expressed their hatred and bias not only against the colonized people but also against the land and even its weather. Moreover, the representation of the colonized by derogatory lexemes, especially corrupt and uncultured, appears so much antithetical to reality such that it was not the colonized but rather the colonizers who created a

culture of corruption and religiously uncultured acts in the colonized land under the pretensions of educating and civilizing the local colonized.

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