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Cross-cultural Issues in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract:

Chinua Achebe was a critic of colonial rule and postcolonial hybridity. His novels are realistic depictions of colonial rule in the African continent. The internal and external conflicts within and between the two communities is the major concern of his writings. The conflict between two cultures is also one of the major themes in *No Longer at Ease*. On the one hand Umuofia, and the Lagos branch of Umuofia Progressive Union, stand for the Igbo culture. On the other hand Obi and his education in London represent the European culture and these two cultures clash with each other throughout the novel.

Keywords: explorers, diviners, dignity, *Kola nut*, Catechist, *osu*, tradition and modernity.

The novel opens with the trial scene of Obi Okonkwo. It has become a subject of talk throughout Lagos. Everyone wants to be present at the trial in the Lagos High Court. Obi has committed crime of accepting bribes and misused his position. But the colonial officers, judges and administration look at the case very differently and with prejudiced minds. Their prejudices about Africa have created stereotypes of African character and social, cultural, and racial conflicts between them. The judge of Lagos high court summarizes the case as, "I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promises could have done this" (Achebe, 02). Obi's eyes fill with treacherous tears on these degrading comments and on the words such as 'education' and 'promise'. The European education is a valuable thing which can transform any layman into a gentleman. But Obi having European education commits a mean crime of accepting bribes. The judge is unable to comprehend because he strongly believes in European education. Therefore, he finds fault with Obi's character which is African in nature and Obi is not able to hold European education for good at all. The prejudiced judge and his misdeeds behind his comments are conspicuous to those who are

present in the court room, and they are able to perceive the racial conflict in that pronouncement against Obi Okonkwo.

Mr. Green, Obi's boss, reviews not only Obi's guilt and reasons behind it but also the African character in general. He is one of the witnesses and well versed man. The British Council man admits that he is unable to understand why Obi has committed the guilt. But Mr. Green's summation of Obi's crime in particular and African character in general is very important, "The African is corrupt through and through" (03). One can easily understand that the judgment is clearly biased and a political one. It needs not to say that the social and cultural forces were in conflict in African continent during the British rule. Mr. Green blames Africans for their misdeeds and fashions racial stereotypes of Africans as corrupt. He does not stop there but adds that,

"The fact over countless centuries the African has been the victim of the worst climate in world and of every imaginable disease. Hardly his fault. But he has been sapped mentally and physically. We have brought him Western education. But what use is it to him." (4)

Achebe wants to expose the Europeans, who disguise themselves as explorers and diviners but in reality they are completely racist. They view the African social and political climate is able to fail a European educated person. Moreover, the European education cannot change African mentality which is shaped by African social and cultural atmosphere and its result is the crime Obi has committed. But Prof. Eustace Palmer paraphrases Achebe's opinion that, "Achebe, here and elsewhere, attributes the source of corruption where it belongs to the advent of white man and his introduction of a money based economy" (70).

Achebe vividly illustrates how an individual or a community as a whole is treated in colonial state of affairs. In such confused state of mind, Obi commits guilt in western administrative system and loses his dignity. The novel begins with the last scene of the novel and after it the whole novel is a flash back of Obi's life, his parents and what has happened in Umuofia and in Lagos, to the final catastrophe of Obi's crime and his trial scene.

Obi returns from London after four years and his village welcomes him with happiness and celebration. There is a huge gathering at Obi's house. After taking primary information about Obi's stay, education in foreign country and the distance from Umuofia, one of the old men in house asks Obi's father to bring them a kola nut to break on Obi's return. Whereupon Obi's father Issak Okonkwo roars, "this is a Christian house a Kola nut is eaten here but not sacrificed to idols" (Achebe, 59). In response, the old man expresses his disgust and moves to sit outside the house. Obi's father is a converted Christian. He does not

follow the traditional way of life and the Igbo religious practices. He clears to the gathering that, “I am not refusing to place a kola nut before you. What I say is that it will not be used as a heathen sacrifice in my house” (59). Here the traditional Igbo faith of braking kola nut and offering it to the idols for safe returning of Obi from White man’s country are caught into in a clash with the Christian faith which does not believe in sacrifices. As Issak Okonkwo denies the sacrifice of kola to idols, it is broken in Christian way with prayers. “Bless this kola so that when we eat it will be good in our body in the name of Jesus Kristi. As it was in the beginning it will be at the end. Amen” (60). Then the conversation turns again to Obi, and they thank the God that Obi is not married with a White woman. All the men appreciate Obi’s safe return. In response to it, Odogwu one of the old men says that Obi is the grandson of Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*, and asks Obi to stand up and Obi stands. “Remark him said Odogwu, he is Okonkwo come back, he is Okonkwo kpon-kwen, exact, perfect” (62). Obi’s father clears his throat in embarrassment, “dead men do not come back,” he protests (62).

This is another disagreement between two faiths. Achebe very cleverly brings two conflicting views on the surface in a playful manner. Though the two faiths are contradictory to each other, they are accepted by their followers in peaceful way. And in the end the gathering indulges in the discussion on these days, the greatness has changed its tune and it lies in the things of White man and they have to change themselves with the tune.

Obi’s father is not only a converted Christian but a Catechist too. He expects his wife should behave as a catechist’s wife with great responsibilities. Obi reminds how his mother used to tell the folk stories to small children but she has stopped to do so. Because her husband has forbidden her, “We are not heathens,” he has said. “Stories like that are not for the people of the Church” (66). The African folk stories are full of magic, superstitions, miracles and composed of incidents which are not acceptable to Christianity. Therefore, her husband has told her not to tell such heathen stories because they are Christians. On the other hand, Obi likes such stories very much. Achebe with the help of such situations captures the tendencies of Christians that how they divide the natives and categorize and treat them differently. The early Christians have categorized the natives into two categories. The first category is of “people of nothing,” (66) it includes the heathen, ignored and followers of the traditional Igbo customs and ways of life. They are considered uncivilized by the Christians. The second category is of “people of the church,” (66) it includes the converted Christians, more rational, followers of the new teaching. Hence, they are considered civilized. Obi’s family is in the second category; the people of the church. Obi’s mother, the wife of a catechist does not allow the children to accept any food from neighbors’ house because it is

heathen food offered to idols, and Christians are not allowed to eat the heathen food. After the evening prayer Obi's father asks Obi whether he reads the Bible regularly or not, because he finds that Obi is unable to read properly. Obi's father always insists upon the Christian nature of his education, on the other hand his mother insists on native folklore. When Obi begins to go school, he likes the lesson called 'oral' in which the teacher asks a student to tell a folk story. But in Obi's turn, he cannot tell a folk story and begins to cry. It is clear that Obi's double heritage is always in conflict with each other. He is unable to understand the lessons in the Bible and is also unable to narrate a folk story at the school. Achebe through such incidents and with minute observation reveals the cultural clashes between two faiths and cultures.

The most important controversy between two cultures and between tradition and modernity is the issue of Obi's marriage with Clara, an *osu*. Obi and Clara met in a dance party which was organized by the National Council of Nigeria and the Cameroons at the St. Pancras Town Hall in London. Obi had a dance with Clara in the party. After eighteen months, they meet again on the boat returning to Nigeria. Obi falls in love with Clara during the journey and proposes her. Clara joins duty as Assistant Nursing Sister in a hospital and engages with Obi. When Clara tells Obi that she is an *osu*, therefore, they cannot marry, then Obi discusses the matter with his friend Joseph. The discussion between them is very important because it reflects the tension between tradition and modernity. Joseph advises Obi that he must not marry that girl and Obi reacts that he is not seeking his approval but he is going to marry Clara. Joseph cannot understand Obi's strangeness to his own traditions and the *osu* cult. He says,

"You know book, but this is no matter for book. Do you know what an *osu* is? But how can you know? In that short question he said in effect that Obi's mission house upbringing and European education has made him a stranger in his country." (82)

Here, Achebe wants to stress the point that the young generation educated in Europe has accepted the European modernity. They have become more rational and justify their disapproval of their culture and religious beliefs. Joseph is the first, Obi has faced and he knows that he has to face a number of opponents to come from his family, clan and the whole Umuofia.

Obi knows that he cannot marry an *osu* not even with the spirit of anti-Igbo tradition which his father, a Christian fanatic brought him up, but with his characteristic tendency to rationalize every situation in life. He is confident that he can set aside the age-long custom, and stubbornly asserts that,

“It is scandalous that in the middle of the twentieth century a man can be barred from marrying a girl simply because her great-great-great-grandfather had been dedicated to serve a god, thereby setting himself apart and turning his descendants into a forbidden caste to the end of Time. Quite unbelievable. And here was an educated man telling Obi he did not understand.” (82)

The above attitude of Obi is a gift of western education. He has shaped his personality on the ideals of modern world and these ideas are going into immediate conflict with his own traditions and customs about the *osu* cult. Joseph clears to Obi that what he is going to do will not only concern his own life but his whole family as well as his future generations. He also reminds him that he is the only son of Umuofia who has been educated overseas and what would happen to the hopes that are pinned by those people who have collected money for his education. Contrary to that Obi does not acknowledge the nature of support and takes it in western practical way, “it is only a loan, remember, I shall pay it all back to the last anini” (86). Achebe here clears that Obi has become completely indifferent to his people and is unable to think the matter out of rationality. Obi’s indifference to his people and traditions is an outcome of his European modernity. Prof. G. D. Killiam analyzes the situations and explains,

Obi is a modern man and his story comprises a modern tragedy. In this novel Achebe provides a record, transmuted by his personality and personal vision of, on the one hand, the nature of ‘modernity’-in terms of its social, political and economic implications- imposed through colonial action on Nigeria, and on the other, the price Nigerians have paid for it. (37)

Killiam concludes that Obi is an agent and product of colonial intervention into Umuofia because he has brought the strange value system in Umuofia.

Obi knows that he has to face a strong opposition from his family to his decision to marry with an *osu* girl. He takes two weeks local leave to visit his ill mother. In that visit Obi has a serious discussion with his father and mother over the issue of marriage. First, Obi’s father makes enquiry about the girl and then says Obi cannot marry the girl because she is an *osu*. Whereupon Obi insists that it does not matter because they are Christians. But Obi’s father puts that though they are Christian it is not the reason to marry an *osu*. Obi defends that even the Bible says that there are no free or bound people. All are equal. Obi’s father defines that Christianity cannot alter the mentality of the people and cannot change the custom of *osu*. But according to Obi all things are going to change in future and the world will be different. One can easily observe that Obi argues on two points. First, he tries to remind his

father that Christianity does not give importance to caste system and all the humans are equal to it. Second, he asserts that the caste system is created in ancient times and it is going to change in ten years of time. His father however, does not see such possibility of change in the people and remains firm to his traditions and defines,

“Osu is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg of you, my son, not to bring that 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-you will bring sorrow on your head and on the heads of your children. Who will marry your daughter? Whose daughters will your sons marry? Think of that son. We are Christians, but we cannot marry our own daughters.” (Achebe, 152)

This argument of Mr. Okonkwo has a deep impact on Obi’s character. Obi is able to see inconsistency between his fathers’ Christianity and the *osu* custom. This upsets Obi’s European moral standards to which he is firmly bound. He does not consider his own cultural values and Umuofia. Achebe, with the help of above discussion between Obi and his father exhibits the controversy between two cultural systems and faiths.

But for Obi this opposition of his father is not as strong as he has expected and he feels little happy over the mildness of the resistance. But contrary to it he has never expected the strange behaviour from his mother. She tells him of the bad dream, she has seen one night. She narrates,

“I did not tell anybody about that dream. I carried it in my heart wondering what it was. I took down my Bible and read the portion for the day. It gave me strength but my heart is still not at rest. In the afternoon your father came in with a letter from Joseph to tell us that you are going to marry an *osu*. I saw the meaning of my death in the dream-I have nothing to tell you in this matter except one thing. If you want to marry this girl, you must wait until I am no more. If God hears my prayers, you will not wait long.” (154)

Obi is terrified by that sudden change and conviction of his mother. These are the two different oppositions which create a dilemma in Obi’s mind.

From the time of his visit to Umuofia, his difficulties grow. He faces financial crises. He borrows fifty pounds from Clara. Obi tells what has happened at home to Clara, and she could guess what could have happened. She warns Obi many times that they are deceiving themselves. Then Clara wants to break their engagement, “But Obi refuses stubbornly to be controlled by outdated tribal practices; he is an individual who must be allowed to exercise the supreme choice of his own life” (Carroll, 82). Obi is caught and torn between two

cultures, he can neither accept nor reject his parents values, in addition to this there are many demands on his resources, even he is not able to provide emotional support to Clara, and also unable to provide money for her abortion. In this confused state of affairs, his mother dies, and he cannot attend her funeral because of money problems. It can be observed that, paradoxically Obi's European ideals die with his mother and in confusion he begins to take bribes. He is unable to make transition from traditional to modern values. So he is caught in the middle of situations and conflicting views. He abandons the values and accepts the wide spread situations in modern Lagos and becomes a corrupt man. Abiola Irele studies the situations around Obi and comments on his character,

“Obi turns out in fact to be a man with a narrow sense of values, just as his Western Education is limited to a superficial aesthetic orientation. So his application is restricted to specific delimitations, rather than to the total field, of his social situation.” (16)

Though the situations are worst, Obi knows what is right. But he is unable to stand for it. One can observe Obi's fall from standards is the result of a practical disassociation between the intellectual and the moral poles of his personality and awareness. Obi, to come out of his financial problems and to maintain his lifestyle as expected from his position in senior service, takes bribes from those candidates who are able to get scholarship and have minimum qualifications. One day he falls prey to the trap and is caught taking bribes of mere twenty pounds.

In the final scene of the novel, that is Obi's trial, the Umuofia Progressive Union holds an emergency meeting to collect money for a lawyer for Obi. But most of the members do not find any point to help the *prodigal son* who has insulted the Union and the President for a useless girl.

Achebe stresses the narrowness of Obi's modern ideals and his inability to face the pressures and demands of Umuofia Progressive Union and his duty to his family and Clara. Obi meets his doom because in those entire conflicting situations, he cannot remain firm and follow either values of his western education or traditional values of his parents. Achebe has a critical view towards colonial rule in Africa and has analyzed the situations created by the colonial administration and summarizes that the colonialism is responsible for various conflicts in the lives of African natives. In this way, the cross cultural conflict causes the fall of the hero.

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