

As the Text Speaks: The Repressed Returns in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's novel, *No Longer at Ease*, which is a sequel to his *Things Fall Apart*, has aptly upheld the anxieties related to the formation of the-then new generation of Western- educated Nigerian elites through the depiction of the cardinal protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, the grandson of Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*. In fact, the projection of the character of Obi and the various circumstances that victimize him, makes evident as to how the author has tactfully sublimated his anxieties into his narrative, problematizing the text in order to project his painful entrapment between his indigenous roots which are about to "fall apart" under the colonial hegemony imposed by the prevailing European administration on the one hand, and the terribly manipulating and domineering colonial institutions on the other. To this newly formed generation, the subject-position becomes a blurry, hyphenated space because these young Nigerians on one hand in spite of their Western education are not recognized or accepted by the white-skinned Europeans, on the other hand are alienated by their indigenous people too as they look up at them with reverence and expectation that as they are Western-educated employed in "European posts", they must put forth an exemplary posh lifestyle. Thus, these new Nigerian elites on one hand have to repress their ethnic roots due to the ideologies imposed on them by their European education, on the other hand have to suffer rejection from the colonizers. *No Longer at Ease* becomes a semi-autobiographical novel, and my Paper aims to project how Achebe has used the 'Conscious' of the text to bring forth his anxieties (he is being: like Obi, a Western-educated Nigerian elite with parents who had converted themselves to Christianity) that he has to otherwise repress into the realm of the 'Unconscious'.

Keywords: *Repressed, Conscious, Unconscious, Ethnic, Hegemony*

Introduction

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe has already depicted that Okonkwo's eldest son, Nwoye has converted to Christianity, and has taken the Christian name, Isaac. The process of colonizing by the Europeans has been very tactful. The Christian missionaries have begun with exercising conversion among the outcastes, like the 'osu'-s, and the tortured mothers of twins. The Umuofians have been seen to have a superstition that twins are abominations of the earth, and very mercilessly they are seen to snatch away such babies from their mothers and throw them away in the forests leaving them to perish there. The helpless wailings of such poor newborns have inflicted the young mind of Nwoye. When his father, Okonkwo kills Ikemefuna who has been very close to Nwoye, who has loved Okonkwo like his own father, just to appease the Oracles, Nwoye finds the indigenous traditions and norms absolutely inhumane and thus cuts off his ties with his father thereby attempting to vigorously sever his indigenous roots, his ethnic identity.

In *No Longer at Ease*, the author continues to project how Isaac has acquired prosperity repressing his aboriginal roots to embrace Christianity and join the Church. "By Umuofia standards he was well-to-do. He had been a catechist of the Church Missionary Society for twenty-five years and then retired on a pension of twentyfive pounds a year" (Achebe 8). In fact, to highlight his prosperity, the author goes on to remark about Isaac, "He had been the very first man to build a 'zinc' house in Umuofia" (Achebe 8). Such an example, of course, has tempted more such conversions through which more and more indigenous people have repressed their ethnic roots often practicing Christianity with more zeal and enthusiasm than the Europeans themselves.

Isaac's over-enthusiasm and strong anxiety to project himself as Christian convert are apparent in the way he has emphasized his perspective while prohibiting the tradition of narrating ethnic tales to the young generations at his household: "We are not heathens,' he had said. 'Stories like that are not for the people of the Church" (Achebe 52).

The anxiety of the converted indigenous people to exhibit their faith on the new religion (Christianity), is also projected through Mary, an ethnic woman embracing Christianity, as depicted by the author: "Although Mary lived a long way from the church- three miles or more- she never missed the early morning prayer which the pastor conducted at cock-crow. In the heart of the wet season, or the cold harmattan, Mary was sure to be there" (Achebe 8). The conditioning of these converted indigenous people by the Christian missionaries has been so deft that, these neo-converts are always anxious to repress their indigenous identity, their ethnic self. That becomes the main reason as to why the practice of narrating to the young indigenous children ethnic folklores (of course African traditions, norms and customs initially have depended solely on oral narration), has been forbidden by these enthusiastic converts who are anxious enough to repress their ethnic identity as "heathen", for instance, Obi's father, who is also a Christian convert, who has rejected his indigenous identity as Nwoye and has taken up his Christianized identity as Isaac, has forbidden his wife, Hannah to tell their children such indigenous folktales: "In fact, she used to tell her eldest daughters stories. But that was before Obi was born. She stopped because her husband forbade her to do so" (Achebe 52). Isaac's

identity to thus repress his ethnic self is apparent in the way he has emphasized his perspective while prohibiting the tradition of narrating ethnic folklores to the new generation: "We are not heathens," he had said. "Stories like that are not for the people of the Church" (Achebe 52).

To Obi, during his stay in England, Nigeria becomes a nostalgia which has urged him to return to his indigenous roots: "It seemed more like a decade than four years, what with the miseries of winter then his longing to return home took on the sharpness of physical pain. It was in England that Nigeria first became more than just a name to him" (Achebe 11). The Europeans have been manipulative enough to tempt more young Nigerians away from their ethnic roots, offering the Western-educated ones lucrative posts in the various spheres of the European government with luxurious lodgings and other amenities, as can be found at Ikoyi: "It was once a European reserve. But things had changed, and some Africans in 'European posts' had been given houses in Ikoyi. Obi Okonkwo, for example lived there..." (Achebe 16).

Then there is the alienation within as the ethnic people including the clansmen of these Western-educated Nigerians expect them to maintain and show off a standard of living almost equal to that of the European colonizers. Their alienation from their ethnic clan happens as they are thus other-ed within. They are other-ed without too, as the Europeans in spite of the Western education or conversion into Christianity of these Nigerian elites, hold them with contempt and prejudice as bribe-takers, immoral and unethical.

Obi's pain and anxieties stem from the fact that he is torn between the various expectations from his ethnic people on one hand and on the other hand the ideologies imposed on him by his Western education which have required him to repress his ethnic norms, traditions, and even linguistic identity. Achebe, through Obi, and thus through the metaphor of his text, has depicted his own dilemma as in his European school the-then student-author has once been rebuked for requesting his classmate to pass a soap in his Igbo (Ibo) 'dialect'. Achebe has also often recounted as to how he like other indigenous children in his European school, has been psychologically drilled to worship the white-skinned heroes and hate the colored characters depicted as negative entities in canonical fiction written by European authors. Achebe has read *Gulliver's Travels* and *David Copperfield* together with John Buchan's *Prester John*. Achebe has later recalled that as a reader, he has taken sides with the white characters against the 'savages' and has even developed a dislike for Africans. Such has been the devastating effects of psychological drilling practiced on the Nigerian students in the Christian missionary schools. After completing his education at the Government College, Achebe has moved on to achieve further academic specializations at the University College. However, it was during his studies at Ibadan that he started becoming critical of European literature about Africa. After his final examinations at Ibadan in 1953, Achebe returns to his hometown of Ogidi. His pains, angst and anxieties on his return to his homeland are reflected in Obi's return from England. In the process of the projection of the various metaphorical situations in the novel, Achebe's repressed ethnic self is revived, as his unconscious finds a vent to return to the conscious, the text. Achebe has chosen his characters carefully to metaphorically represent his struggle to discover a subject-position as well as to exist desperately amidst the circumstances leading to exile.

The name 'Obi' is quite a symbolic one. If the name is written in reverse order, it reads as 'Ibo'. Thus, perhaps Obi as a Western-educated Nigerian born to parents who had converted themselves to Christianity, represents not only the author himself, but also many others of Nigeria who are lured away from their indigenous roots through conversion among one generation and Western education among the next. Obi and his Christian converted parents are metaphorical representations of Achebe and his parents. By problematizing the text, Achebe has projected the anxieties and dilemma from which such Western-educated Nigerians have been suffering as his repressed ethnic 'Self' returns to the 'Conscious' of his text through such metaphorical representations. Whereas on one hand, to the ethnic folks "To occupy a 'European post' was second only to actually being a European" (Achebe 84), on the other hand, in spite of conversion into Christianity or Western education, this new stratum of Nigerians is still held with contempt and prejudice by the European colonizers who regard them as unethical and 'bribe-takers', as is apparent in Mr. Green's biased remark: "The African is corrupt through and through...They are all corrupt" (Achebe 3).

Also, through the text, through the metaphorical situation of Obi, Achebe has focused on the concept of 'exile'. With the apparent financial and career-related success of the converted and Western education Nigerians, more and more Nigerians have got tempted to embrace the white man's religion and education, which has taken measures to condition them to repress their ethnic identity through various modes of colonization, including linguistic colonization. Thus, though apparently their exile, that is, their estrangement from their ethnic roots, may seem voluntary, yet is actually an involuntary one, an outcome of the manipulation and tactics of the colonizing whites. The subject-position of such Western educated Nigeria elites like Obi, and through Obi, Achebe, is blurry as they can identify themselves neither with their indigenous clansmen, nor with the Europeans. The dilemmatic position of this new Nigerian generation is that neither can they fall back upon the ways of living of the other ethnic people, nor can they smoothly fit into the expected lifestyle of an elite group as there is a constant psychological pressure on them to maintain themselves as the Western-educated well-to-do elites. About his ethnic people Obi says: "What they did not know was that having labored in sweat and tears to enroll their kinsman among the shining elite, they had to keep him there" (Achebe 90). Such constant pressure leads to Neurosis and eventually Psychosis and as a victim Obi becomes a metaphorical projection of similar such other young Nigerians. In case of Obi, who has got the appointment as Scholarship Secretary at the Federal Ministry of Education, the Lagos branch of the Umuofia Progressive Union which has paid eight hundred pounds for his overseas education, now expects him to repay the loan while maintaining a standard of living suitable to his newly acquired status as an elite with European education. As it is, Obi has already frustrated the expectations of his ethnic people who have sent him to study overseas so that, he will study Law in order to fight their land-cases on their behalf by studying English instead. This action of Obi's though has initially enraged his clansmen, yet later their anger has somewhat been pacified with their expectations that at least Obi will be securing for himself after all a 'European post' in the Civil Service.

Another dilemmatic situation entrapping Obi is his relationship with Clara who is an 'osu', who as per Igbo tradition, is an outcast and must live apart from the free born. Obi, being a free born, cannot marry Clara as per Igbo norms. His father, Isaac, in spite of his conversion and utter devotion to the white man's religion, cannot accept his son's relationship with Clara. Obi's mother, Hannah, also a Christian convert, strongly opposes her son's proposal to marry Clara. In fact, neither his clansmen, nor his parents, nor his friends have approved of the relationship, and this has been well apparent in their words. For instance, Obi's father has advised: "*Osu* is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg of you, my son, not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family..." (Achebe 121). Obi's mother firmly states, "If you want to marry this girl, you must wait until I am no more..." (Achebe 123). His friend, Joseph Okeke, who has been working as a clerk in the Survey Department remarks: "In future, when we are all civilized, anybody may marry anybody. But that time has not come. We of this generation are only pioneers" (Achebe 68). From these quoted words, it is also quite noteworthy as to how an indigenous Nigerian, here Obi's friend, his "country-man" (Achebe 12), Joseph representing many such other ethnic people, have been spontaneously calling themselves 'uncivilized' thereby emphasizing the fact as to how the European colonizers have successfully imposed and manufactured such a consensus due to which many such indigenous people believe that it is the Europeans who have shown them the light of the so-called civilization, thereby repressing into the realms of their unconscious their ethnic self, their ethnic culture, norms and traditions. Hybridization integrating the best features from the foreign culture with the best traits of the indigenous culture is of course an ideal state, but sadly, the mindset of the ethnic people like Joseph and such others has not been really ready to welcome such an ideal condition not through any adopt or adapt phase, but an adept phase. Another friend of Obi, Christopher, too, has not put forth any different mindset as he too disapproves of Obi's decision to marry Clara, as he says: "You may say that I am not broad-minded, but I don't think we have reached the stage where we can ignore all our customs. You may talk about education and so on, but I am not going to marry an *osu*" (Achebe 130). Obi is indeed torn between individual morality and his public responsibility. Achebe, through the depiction of Obi's dealings with the Umuofia Progressive Union and with his own parents, has successfully established the clash between the indigenous traditional values and the newly arrived Western values.

Obi's Western education holds this discrimination regarding 'osu' as illogical, but his clansmen and even his Christian converted parents expect him to respect this ethnic norm. Victimized to this anxiety, Obi fails to take any responsible action which compels Clara to abort her baby, risking her life in the process.

Struggling to meet up to the various expectations from him by his family, his clansmen, his fiancée, and the European administration with all its ideologies imposed on him through its 'Western-ized' education and other policies in his work-place presided over by the Englishman, Mr. Green and other European colleagues, like Miss Tomlinson, Obi fails as a pathetic victim of various anxieties and ambiguities as he suffers from Neurosis and then Psychosis which have led him to his indecisiveness and the resulting blunders that he commits, including his accepting

bribes. His blunders have pathetically alienated him from within as well as without, from his indigenous people, family, and his fiancée, Clara.

These blunders which he has committed after reaching the crossroads due to the various expectations that have imposed on him acute financial pressure, have alienated him from within and without as he fails to identify a properly defined subject-position for himself as he fails to fit into the subject-position of an ordinary Igbo man or of a person akin to the Europeans who have imposed on him Western education.

Perhaps there is an indication that if Western education and job at European post have estranged Obi from his family, then Obi's father, Isaac's conversion into Christianity has alienated him from his father, Ogbuefi Okonkwo. The anxieties of conversion and repression of the ethnic self, have so strongly affected Obi, that he ultimately becomes an alienated existence both in his public as well as his private spheres of life, from the European colonizers on the one hand and his indigenous people on the other, as also from his converted family, and this neatly projected in the closing lines of the novel, where it is well depicted as to how nobody tries to comprehend Obi's situation, that how the pressures exerted on him from within and without, have disintegrated him, have fragmented him, and have led him astray: "The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how an educated young man and so on and so forth. The British Council man, even the men of Umuofia, did not know" (Achebe 154).

The anxieties which such Western-educated Nigerians like Obi, including Achebe himself, have so long repressed into the realms of the 'Unconscious', have through Obi's situation thus returned to the 'Conscious' of the text, that is the novel itself, where the author perhaps has indicated that an ideal Hybridization of the best indigenous traits with the best traits of the colonizing West is desirable to provide this new Nigerian generation some respite from the already incurred damages wrought by the colonizing Europeans.

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