

Corruption as a Colonial legacy in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe, a great Nigerian English novelist was the fifth of six children of his parents. When the youngest daughter was born, the family shifted to Isaiah, which was Achebe's ancestral town of Ogidi, which is now the state of Anambra. Achebe's second novel *No Longer at Ease* is dedicated to his wife, Christie. He in this novel tries to show how the Western materialistic society slowly influences Obi, the protagonist of *No Longer at Ease* making him corrupt slowly. He becomes so corrupt that he ignores and stops valuing his traditional values and customs. The aim of this paper is to examine as to how corruption has set in colonial society and acts as a colonial legacy.

Keywords: Western, materialistic, society, corrupt, influences, traditional values, customs, colonial, legacy etc.

During 1950s, corruption has touched almost all spheres of Nigerian society. The urge to gather more and more material wealth without the conscience being affected among the urban people became the order of the day. The materialistic society of the Western world had destroyed the spirit of the African traditional values which was instrumental in holding the people together. Beginning from the bottom to top of the society, corruption could be noticed and felt. People strayed in all directions as they stopped valuing their traditions and customs that had been holding them together. In this deteriorating situation of contemporary Nigeria, corruption was an accepted reality. Here we can quote Robert M. Wren who in his *Achebe's*

World: the Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe remarks:

“In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe’s task is to give corruption a social context and to show that the context is a complex interaction of the African past, the colonial encounter, and the emergent new hybrid culture”(P. 48).

Obi has been sent to England “to learn book and to bring knowledge” (*No Longer at Ease* P.12) but he fetches bad names, corruptions and all that belong to the colonial hegemony. Instead of pursuing his career, he is “after the sweet things of the flesh” (*No Longer at Ease* P.12). With his exposure to the Western environment and his getting a job in Lagos, he gets totally transformed. Blending with these is his fruitless attempt to equalise his standard of living in Lagos by providing both comfort and luxury. This results in making him more and more desperate for money. He feels the need for more money in order to support himself in the European style of life as Mr. Green supposes. His small salary is not enough for living this kind of life style. In the meantime, it is his responsibility to help his family and also give back the amount of the educational loan granted to him by the UPU (Umuofia Progressive Union). The result of all these is that the financial demands begin piling up on Obi which is obvious from his thinking of borrowing money “from the bank to pay the insurance” (*No Longer at Ease* P.124) and also taking a sum of fifty pounds from Clara.

Therefore, the weight on him regarding his private and public life dampen his spirit and make him morally weak. With his salary, he cannot meet all his needs and requirements. He tries his level best to meet both ends but fails. Finally, he fails to display his courage at a critical moment and so he is left at the crossroads. His mind wavers between refusing and accepting a bribe: “You may cause more trouble by refusing a bribe than accepting it” (*No Longer at Ease* P.100). We feel that Obi is not able to strike a balance between his moral stance and his financial

needs as far as corruption is concerned. Finally, he resorts to accepting bribes to redeem himself. 'Kola nut' according to Igbo belief means making friendship. But the man who brings twenty pounds to Obi said that it was a small gift in the form of kola that would make them good friends. Here, 'Kola' symbolises making friendship with 'corruption' and the 'corruption' betrays him bringing tragedy in his life. He submits to the pressures of corruption. The pressures of financial and social needs throw him into a cyclone and thus his fall is an inevitable one. According to the UPU, accepting the bribe was the crime of Obi:

"It was a thing of shame for a man in the senior service to go to prison for twenty pounds" (*No Longer at Ease*, P.6).

The president of the union thought that if Obi wanted to "eat a toad", he should look for a "fat and juicy one" (*No Longer at Ease*, P.7).

Obi's fault and mistake not only lie in his acceptance of bribe but his inexperience in doing so. Indeed, he is not aware of the ways of the corrupt society and so he becomes an easy victim of corruption of his own society. This is Obi's tragedy. Obi is in a complex post-colonial situation and his disintegration is quite natural and inevitable:

"...what kind of democracy can exist side by side with so much corruption and ignorance?" (*No Longer at Ease*, P.50)

The novel does not deal with Obi's tragedy alone but it also depicts the tragedy of Nigeria in the wake of independence. Obi's predicament is the nation's predicament. Obi, by accepting the twenty pounds bribe, has shattered every hope, every dream that the Umuofians cherished while sending him overseas for his education. He has brought disgrace to his motherland and is apparent in the proverb: "If one finger brings oil it soils the others" (*No Longer at Ease*, P.86).

Through Obi, Achebe problematises the complex situations of post-colonial African society. Obi's fall is participated by the

widespread moral confusion of the colonial society in Nigeria. His fall symbolises the breakdown of the homeland. He is positioned in the Lagos society whose traditional values have been shattered by the procedure of colonial history. There is the absence of moral principles to guide the society. This is clearly seen in the relation of Obi and Clara and also in accepting bribes. Immorality and corruption have crept up in society like a disease which cannot be cured. Obi like the Magi after return from the journey becomes a total stranger to the world he belongs. The novel, thus, is a representation of the failure of a black white man in a post-colonial period.

Chinua Achebe has presented the theme of 'anarchy' in his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958) in the pre-and post-colonial African society. This theme is once again made a predominant theme in his second sequential novel *No Longer at Ease* (1960) depicting the 'anarchy' in the post-colonial period. The theme of 'anarchy' in the post-independence era too is let loose upon the world and everything is falling apart and the vehicle for conveying this anarchy is through the twenty six years old young man, Obi Okonkwo.

The novel opens with the trial of the protagonist, Obi, a British-educated who is caught while taking bribes red-handed and is convicted for it. The question that comes to the mind of many was as the learned judge put it to Obi, "how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this" (P.2). He cannot understand why such an educated man acts in such a silly way. Many do not understand why Obi did it and that also for only 'twenty pounds'. Mr. Green, Obi's boss remarks:

"The African is corrupt through and through" (P.3). He again repeats:

"They are all corrupt" (P.4) and further adds: "The fact that over countless centuries the African has been the victim of the worst climate in the world and of every imaginative disease. Hardly his

fault. But he has sapped mentally and physically. We have brought him Western education. But what use is it to him? He is..." (*No Longer at Ease*, P. 4).

Mr. Green interprets the African psyche from the colonial point of view. His assertion supports the incapacity of the Africans to modify themselves with the help of Western education. This demeaning approach of Mr. Green is suggestive of the colonial construction of the colonised in the post-colonial period.

However, a tone of sarcasm runs in his statement:

"...We have brought him Western education. But what use is it to him?"

It is the influence of Western education that he undertakes that shapes Obi's outlook and his way of living totally different from the Umuofian way of living. The Western education has framed him to be a 'corrupt' man, a "Beast of no nation" (P.173). With the attainment of Western education, Obi disintegrates within himself and is characterised by his incoherence. He yields to the financial pressures upon himself. He has to repay the loan and is responsible for sending money home. Eventually, he breaks under the pressures and gives in to bribery against which he stood idealistically at one time. Here we can very appropriately quote C.L. Innes and Bernth Lindfors who in their work *Critical Perspectives on Chinua Achebe* maintain:

"His decision to take bribes is at once a confirmation of his loss of a sense of identity in himself" (P.160).

He belongs to the two shifting worlds – moral and material worlds and so he suffers from identity crisis. But at last the materialistic world succeeds him leaving him in a pathetic condition, not even arousing a sense of pity for him. He becomes a 'beast' that belongs to nowhere. He accepts the 'Kola' symbolising 'corruption' which is responsible for bringing

anarchy in his life, in his family, in Umuofia, in Nigeria and in Africa in the post-colonial period.

Obi's lack of sense of identity is exemplified in his feeble-mindedness to act when his mother threatens to kill herself:

"But if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself" (*No Longer at Ease*, P.154).

Even though she threatens to kill herself, yet he tells Clara "to find a way out" (*No Longer at Ease*, P.163). His inner self has started becoming weak and it reaches its climax in his decision of aborting the baby in Clara's womb. There is no sense and point in admitting other's sense of identity if he himself has already lost his own sense of identity. Obi is a very good example of this. He never takes into account Clara's tastes and likings for example: "Obi, who did not care for films, especially those that Clara called good" (*No Longer at Ease*, P.21). He also fails to acknowledge Clara's handwriting:

"One of the most wonderful things about her was her writing. It was so feminine. But Obi was not thinking about writing just now" (*No Longer at Ease*, P.122).

This mindset of Obi is suggestive of the fact that his relationship with his fiancée is superficial and shallow and not deep and intimate as one that happens in the Western world bringing anarchy.

Obi is an eminent man of words and books, but not exactly a man of action like Ogbuefi Okonkwo, the protagonist of *Things Fall Apart* who was a man of drastic action. It was the inability of Ogbuefi to express himself in words and this was indicated by some sort of stammering in his conversation with others. On the contrary, Obi is a man of thought and words whose downfall is predicted by his inability to act: "paralysed by his thought" (*No Longer at Ease*, P.169). He destroys himself by his inaction. Achebe has portrayed Obi's childhood as a brilliant student who

won the scholarship from the Umuofian Progressive Union to study abroad. He spends his childhood in the world of 'book'. But the European education and values wiped out the sense of rootedness from his mind and this ultimately led him to end in prison. With the development of the plot of the novel, Obi's inaction is further suggested. He, on one hand theorises the elimination of bribery and corruption from Lagos, is symbolical representation of Africa. He formulates the theory but his theory on the other hand proves to be merely words when he himself becomes 'a bribe taker'. When he finds that he cannot resist himself from accepting the bribe, he tries to hide the 'fifty' pounds of money the man gave him by placing a "newspaper over it and secured the door" (*No Longer at Ease*, P.192). This is how his own theory fails and he buries his 'idealistic' theory himself. The failure of his 'theory' parallels with the downfall of Obi, the man of book and theory. Later, we see that he resorts to accepting bribes to redeem himself. We can here quote and see how David Cook in his *African Literature: A Critical View* sums up the whole situation as:

"His mother has died in bitterness and been buried ignominiously; Clara has been sacrificed to the abortionist' knife and has retired to a new loneliness. At the nadir of his fortunes, events overcome Obi; his principles prove to be shallow-rooted; he succumbs and falls (Cook, P.92)

Obi succumbs to the pressures of a corrupt and restricted society. It was normal that he with his handsome salary, education and idealism would not yield to temptation. The Whites bring destruction, disintegration to the natives during the colonial period and it still continues in the post-colonial period. The destruction is felt not only in the land but in the native people also. They are physically, emotionally and psychologically disturbed by the impact of colonialism. The most dramatic and in fact the culminating image of the destructive force of the whiteness is seen Obi's mother dream:

"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 a 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" (*No Longer at Ease*, P.154).

In her dreams, 'a swarm of white termites' have eaten her up. She is the victim of the white world whose agent is her own son who is revealed. The 'white cloth and the white termites' are the metaphorical representations of the presence of colonialism and its impact in Umuofia in the post-independence period. The second image of Obi's mother as victim of the White is made explicit in her being wounded by his son's school razor. Obi's attitude towards his native language is again another of the typical instance of the destruction of natives by the Whites. English is not the native language of Obi, yet he learns it through western education. Obi's inability to utter his own mother tongue fluently is suggestive of his alienation from his own society.

A comprehensive study of Chinua Achebe's novel reveals the genuine post-colonial African predicament, representing all the post-colonial societies. The historical process from the first impact of colonialism to the 1980s, the devaluation, disintegration and marginalisation of native culture, creation of a schizophrenic and hybridized individual due to Western education and the social, political, and moral conflicts prevalent in the native indigenous societies are portrayed by Chinua Achebe in his novel, *No Longer at Ease*. The creation of mental confusion, lack of direction, alienation, identity crisis in the post-independence individual of the emerging new nation are vividly captured in the novel. The hybridized hero of the novel, Obi, belongs to neither of the two worlds-Western and traditional-is the real product of the post-colonial African society. Such men instead of salvaging their society, they further act as a catalyst in bringing further disintegration of the society and finally anarchy

rules in the land. Native culture is uprooted and displaced in the pursuit of the material wealth and power thereby shattering the cherished 'dreams' of the masses into pieces. The hopes and aspirations of a free, prosperous and dignified nation are thus belied and betrayed coming under the influence of European education. Obi oscillates between the native traditions and the European traditions, between his mother and his fiancée, between his inner-self and the materialistic world represented by the land of Lagos and yet unable to fully synthesize between the two opposing worlds. There is no sense of personal empowerment in himself that can fight both the forces, or to accept both the forces. This leads to the fragmentation in Obi as a consequence of which a feeling of self-estrangement and alienation follow. He becomes a victim of post-colonial society. He becomes a complete failure and a total misfit in both the worlds. He feels that he cannot completely dissociate himself from the colonial culture which he has imbibed from his exposure to the Western world, nor can he totally identify with the Igbo culture of his ancestors. It is the impact of the higher education that he has received that has put him in a position where he is no longer at ease. The 'peace' becomes 'un-peace'. The cherished dreams of his family and his Umuofian people shatter. The 'light' disillusioned all of them by leading them not from darkness to light, but moving towards more darkness. To bring a political and a social renaissance, Achebe alarms his countrymen that the impact of colonialism is still felt in the post-independence era and he strikes an optimistic note that the legacy of colonialism can be adapted and modified for their own special needs.

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