

CHINUA ACHEBE'S *NO LONGER AT EASE* AS A POST COLONIAL NOVEL

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Abstract

This paper studies Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* as a Postcolonial Novel. It situates the novel within the postcolonial discourse by looking theories of post-colonialism. It shows how colonialist discourse created a negative image of Africa, which the post – colonial writers attempt to correct in their creative works. It situates Chinua Achebe within the anti-imperialistic discourse and shows how through this novel, Achebe has tried to give a true perspective of his society. He has not shown an idyllic Africa, but takes a sympathetic but honest view of a society with its own set of causalities. The problem of corruption, which is a common phenomenon in post-colonial societies, is the main focus in the novel.

Keywords: post-colonialism, colonial consciousness, Other, Dark Continent, corruption.

The British colonized the world not just with the help of military might and economic strength but also by propagating the idea of their superiority among the colonized cultures which were deemed as inferior. Edward Said's critique of the Orientalist discourse has shown a clear relation between the territorial expansion by the British and the French and the Orientalist discourse which portrayed the Orient as inferior to Europe and thus ready for domination. One of the important tools in the colonizing process was English language and literature. Gauri Vishwanathan has traced the political origins of the discipline of English literature and has shown how literature was first used by the colonial administrators to consolidate the colonial structures in an unobtrusive manner.

The colonial expansion by the British has produced a body of literature which portrays the tensions and complications involved in the encounter between two cultures, dominating and dominated. Such literature is termed as colonialist literature by Abdul R. JanMohammed. It is written from the point of view of the dominating culture and is a part of the colonial discourse. It can be written by writers belonging to the dominating cultures such as Kipling or Forster, or by writers such as V.S. Naipaul who do not belong to the dominating culture, but adopt the point of view of the dominating culture. JanMohammed has shown how the colonized culture is

denigrated in colonialist literature which affirms its own ethnocentric assumptions instead of exploring the racial *Other* and valorizes the superiority of European cultures.

The propagation of English language and literature has produced a body of literatures written in English by writers from colonized countries which is termed as Commonwealth Literature. After the process of decolonization, the literature produced by formerly colonized countries is also called Third World Literature. JanMohammed has shown how colonialist literature has failed to mediate between different cultures and says that the domain of literary and cultural syncretism belongs increasingly to the third world writers. The Third World Literature is termed as the literature of ‘colonial consciousness’ by O.P. Joneja. According to him the novel of colonial consciousness is the product of the historical event of colonization. Such novels exhibit a distinct sense of awareness of the interaction of colonial machinery with the native civilization. They seek to show the impact of the culture of the colonizer on the colonized country. (Joneja, Colonial Consciousness). In another article, he shows how the emergence of the novel in Africa and India is related to the development of colonization (Joneja, Fictional Strategies).

The texts which comprise the Third World literature are conscious of their social relevance. The term “Third World Literature” itself indicates how these texts are rooted in their contexts. As Edward Said (*The World, the Text and the Critic*) says, the texts are enmeshed in circumstances, time, place and society—they are in the world and therefore worldly. Chinua Achebe, the Nigerian novelist says that writers write according to the needs of the needs of their society. He says that his mission is to teach about dignity of African heritage to his society and help it to regain its belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration. Through his novels he wants to teach his readers that their past with all its imperfections was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God’s behalf delivered them (Achebe, The Novelist as Teacher). Achebe, as TRS Sharma points out, has come to represent a canonical voice inscribed in anti-imperialistic discourse. And, it is in this context that I attempt to read to his novel *No Longer at Ease* (cited as *NLAE* in the paper) as a Post-Colonial text.

JanMohammed distinguishes between two phases of colonialism, ‘dominant’ and hegemonic’. The dominant phase of colonialism spans the period from the earliest European conquest to the moment at which a colony is granted independence. In the hegemonic phase of colonialism which begins after the country has achieved independence, the natives internalize western culture and the colonizers entire system of values. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe shows the tribal African society making its first contact with the European colonizers, and in *No Longer at Ease*, he portrays a period of transition from colonial rule to full independence. Thus, in *Things Full Apart* Achebe depicts the ‘dominant’ aspect of colonialism while in *No Longer at Ease*, we can see that the ‘hegemonic’ from of colonization has already begun.

Vishwanathan has shown in her book that by introducing English studies in India the colonial administrators in India wanted to create a class of brown Englishmen who would act as intermediary between the ruler and the masses. The hero of *No Longer at Ease*, Obi Okonkwo is one of the “been to” boys who has had the advantage of studying in England. He has absorbed the values of the colonizer through the education system, devised by the colonizer. He believes in the myth of his own inferiority and behaves in the fashion he is expected to behave by his colonizing masters. Obi’s acceptance of bribe is seen as inevitable. That is why Achebe relates his trial at the beginning of the novel and then in a flashback, relates the events that led him to

accept the bribe. As the novel opens, Obi is already in the dock, accused and found guilty of having taken a bribe of twenty pounds.

Obi's plight is typical of people living in post-colonial societies. They have to come to terms with two cultures, their own and that of the colonizers. Because of the influence of the colonizers culture, they feel cut off from their own past and at the same time do not belong wholly to the colonizer's culture. Obi feels caught between cultures which are in conflict with each other. Obi's British education alienates him from his less learned Umofia brethren and, at the same time, it fails to put him on par with his boss Mr. Green. He can only exchange empty banter with Christopher who like him has been educated in England. Obi feels disconnected from his past. His father had zealously embraced the Christian Faith and had made a clean break with his past. So Obi does not even have his native culture to fall back upon. In chapter 6, he remembers an incident from his childhood when he had felt cut off from his past. Obi's father had forbidden his mother to tell folk stories to children. So when Obi was called upon to tell a folk story in the oral lesson, he could not do so. He neither finds security in identification with the past, nor can he adjust to the colonial situation in the present. His British education may have improved his fortune materially by making him eligible for the longed for "European Post" and all the special status that accompanies it, but it has not prepared him to handle the disparity of two conflicting cultures which are a part of him. As a native educated by the colonizer he should have been able to bridge the gap between two cultures, but he fails to do so, and by portraying this failure in the novel, Achebe tries to suggest that the British education system is inadequate for the natives of his country.

Obi's boss, Mr. Green also wonders at the use of western education for the Africans, who according to him are totally corrupt. He is a thorough colonialist. He believes in the supremacy of the white race and has no respect for Africans. Obi dislikes him but at the same time has a grudging admiration for his work ethic which is beyond reproach. Obi, and through him Achebe, makes him out to be a latter day Kurtz. He says about Mr. Green that, "He must have come originally with an ideal – to bring light to the heart of darkness, to tribal head-hunters performing weird ceremonies and unspeakable rites" (*NLAE*, 101). Here, by making a comparison between Mr. Green and Conrad's Mr. Kurtz, Achebe criticizes the colonizers comforting myths about Africa.

Bratlinger has shown how colonialism in Africa, which was established after the abolition of slavery, is an outcome of Victorian racist and evolutionary theories. He shows how the myth of the 'Dark Continent' is a Victorian invention. As a part of the larger discourse about the empire, it was shaped by political and economic pressures and also by the psychology of blaming the victim through which the Europeans projected their darkest impulses onto Africans. He shows how Conrad has adopted this myth of the 'Dark Continent' in his novel on Africa, appropriately named *Heart of Darkness*. Africa is the location of hell on earth for Conrad and at the centre of the hell is Kurtz, the would be civilizer, the embodiment of Europe's highest and nobler virtues, radiating darkness. Bratlinger points out that the ultimate atrocity is not some form of tribal savagery, but it is Kurtz's regression, his betrayal of the ideals of civilization. Achebe in this novel tries to shift the focus back from Kurtz to Africa, from Mr. Green to the country which he rules, the country which is the native land of Obi Okonkwo. Thus Achebe reacts to the colonizer's version of Africa and puts forward his own vision of his country.

JanMohammed has pointed out that Achebe's depiction of corruption in Africa in the novel is sympathetic and therefore more informative when compared to Naipaul's versions of

third-world society which reveals the operation of colonialist mentality. The Africans in *A Bend in the River* are “irrevocably damned occupants of a landscape of hell” (Thieme, 185) and the whole narrative shows nothing of value coming out of Africa. It shows an Africa without future, condemned to a cycle of revolution and peace.

However, in order to create a positive image of Africa, Achebe does not blindly blame the colonizers for all the ills that beset his country. He is aware of all the imperfections of his culture and criticizes them in the novel. The protest is not only against the white man’s civilization, but also against his own past. Obi Okonkwo’s African elders frown upon his wish to marry Clara who is an *Osu*, an outcast. Such a deep seated prejudice is present even in Obi’s devoted Christian father. The sacrilege of the proposed marriage is acknowledged even by Christopher, Obi’s Friend from the London School of Economics. Obi feels that the reaction of his parents, friends and Umofia elders was scandalous and unbelievable in the middle of the twentieth century. But his Umofia brethren call his defiance of this social norm a result of his mission house upbringing and European education which has made him a stranger in his own country. Obi’s determination to marry Clara is half-hearted and is strengthened only by his defiance against the society. It is Clara who finally bows down under pressure and refuses to marry him and thus gives him an easy way out.

Although in *No Longer at Ease* Achebe does not portray tribal African life as he does in *Things Fall Apart*, the tribe in its own way tries to assert its claim for fellowship on Obi who wants to lead his own life. In spite of his rude treatment of the elders of Umofia Progressive Union when they try to stop him from marrying Clara, they help him out when he is in trouble. They console him when his mother dies and gather funds for his defense when he is charged with bribery. The sense of community which is at the centre in *Things Fall Apart* is present in this novel, but in a diminished form. This is the positive aspect of African society that Achebe has tried to point out.

According to JanMohammed, the Third World’s literary dialogue with western culture is marked by two broad characteristics. The first is an attempt to negate the prior European negation of colonized cultures and we have seen how Achebe tries to negate colonialist image of Africa. The second is its adoption and creative modification of western languages. D. A. Shanker has shown how Achebe refutes the notion that Africans can never write as well in English as the native speakers and says that it is neither necessary nor desirable to do so. The price that a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. Joneja has pointed out how Achebe maintains an autonomous relationship with English language and has extended the horizons of English language by introducing in it proverbial and metaphorical comments from the native dialect of his country. He weaves the native linguistic feature unobtrusively into the total fabric of the novel and brings native flavor into English by use of such stylistic devices such as proverbs – “anger against brother is felt in flesh, not in the bone”, introduces traditional folk stories and mythology, and, the uses particularized words in English like *Chi* which means spirit and *Osu* which means outcast. These features are introduced into the novel without explanations and the reader is left to gather their meaning through inference. (Joneja, Colonialism and the Novel)

Thus, we can see that Achebe portrays the post-colonial situation in Nigeria in a sensitive manner in the novel *No Longer at Ease*.

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