

Diffusion of English Culture in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's (1930-2013) *No Longer at Ease* (1960) illustrates the diffusion of English culture in Nigeria and its influence on people's life through Obi Okonkwo's identity. Obi is a Western educated person as well as the protagonist of the novel. This paper highlights on the diffusion of English culture in Nigeria and submission of the Nigerian culture in order to portray their inferiority. The effect of colonialism and imperialism on the minds of the black characters is presented. It also shows how Western orientalist and colonialist education shape the image and identity of the blacks. In this paper Edward Said's (1935-2003) attempts on Orientalism and Frantz Fanon's (1925-1961) concerns relating to inferiority of the indigenous people triggered by colonization are used.

Through various ways such as education, religion, and language etc. the Colonisers touch the life, mind, culture, and identity of the colonized. Such effects bring some alteration in culture and language of the colonized. The colonizers impose their ascendancy on the natives and consider them as others by stereotyping whereas the colonized try to assimilate with the colonisers. Achebe in this novel depicts how this exertion cause binary relation among the characters. The author, in this particular novel presents the disparity between two cultures. He puts emphasis on the superiority of English culture and depicts how colonialism and Western orientalism fabricates stereotyped images of Nigerians and present Obi as corrupt. Such features have great impact on the mind of Nigerians, resulting in inferiority complex. Such characteristics tempt the Nigerians to follow European values and forget their own culture resulting in the rejection of native values.

Keywords: Colonialism, Cultural alteration, Cultural Diffusion, Orientalism, Stereotype.

Introduction

Albert Chinualumogu Achebe (1930-2013), generally known as Chinua Achebe, was born in Ibo village of Ogidi in southeastern Nigeria. Although Achebe's parents converted to Christianity, but they also admired their traditions. Therefore, his childhood was regarded by rich ambivalence of heritage. He was accepted at the

University College in Nigeria on a scholarship. At first, he studied medicine, but he changed it to English-like the protagonist of *No Longer at Ease* (NLE), Obi.

This paper is a study of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* through the screen of Orientalism and attempts to show the diffusion of English culture in Africa. The orientalists' notions about Africa and the colonialist's attitude towards Africans are analysed in this paper. *No Longer at Ease* is about a civil servant who finally becomes corrupt with the corruption of the society of Lagos. The protagonist is Obi Okonkwo, a grandson of Achebe's first protagonist in *Things Fall Apart*. Obi struggles against many obstacles. He tries to live a decent life while trying to satisfy his family, his home village, and the society at large. But being unable to balance between his values and the expectations of the society, Obi finally experiences a total breakdown.

METHODOLOGY

This article relies on library study, textual discussion and analysis. It follows the descriptive and the analytical method. *No Longer at Ease* by Chinua Achebe is the primary source of this paper.

ANALYSIS

This paper shows how colonisers influence the identity and culture of the colonized nations through the theories of Edward Said (1935-2003). Critics like Edward Said and Frantz Fanon try to inspect the colonized people as victims of the Western hegemony, and scrutinise the ways in which colonial discourse act as an instrument of power.

The Orient is presented as weak, irrational, and feminine in contrast to the strong, rational, and masculine West by the western writings. Binary opposition is created by the stereotypical images and archetypes constructed by literary texts and historical records about the East. In Orientalism (1978), Said argues that the cultural shoddiness of the Orient is ascribed to the thriving Creativity & Literacy nature or 'essence' of the Oriental. Said finds out afar the knowledge about the Orient produced by European hegemony. knowledge about the orient produced by European hegemony is not authentic.

It privileges the European culture, and marginalize the other.

Another significant issue, which makes the black to accept the superiority of the white culture is the colonizers' own discursal patterns and their stereotypical images of Africans. In relation to Said's theory, the Europeans try to make stereotypes about the Nigerians and present them as corrupt when required in order to civilize them, which is depicted in the novel.

Every country is a set of traditions and customs that erect individual life style. Understanding a society's customs and faiths is equal to understanding its cultural identity. Tribal and colonized nations have been transformed by colonialism because of the cultural alienation of their traditions. Domination over a country in general, and over its culture, in particular by the colonizers have caused the changes. European cultural invasion over non-Europeans have disturbed the stability of the traditional culture. The colonizers first expand its trade, Christianity, education, and transforms the indigenous people's cultural identity. Simultaneously, the culture of the colonized change and a new culture emerge. Achebe in his narrative tries to show that colonialism experience and the Diffusion of European culture in Nigeria have laid the foundation of the new cultural identity and distortion of African cultural identity. Throughout his novel, Achebe show the European education, especially when it worries the study of African culture and people. He presents through the lens of Orientalists, based on the vital difference between Europeans and non-Europeans. Western orientalist represent Europeans as civilized, educated, and powerful while non-Europeans as backward, lazy, and powerless. This kind of image-formation is amplified by the occurrence of colonialism. Thus, it affects the mentality of both colonizers and the colonized.

Obi, a typical educated young man has a firm belief that the European education have positive effect on Nigeria. He considers the "old Africans" as the roots of all problems in Nigeria and do not have any respect for them. The old Africans refer to those Africans who still occupy some offices and lack ample education and skill to cope with modern Nigeria's circumstances:

Obi's theory that the public service of Nigeria would remain corrupt until the old Africans at the top were replaced by young men from the universities was first formulated in a paper read to the Nigerian Students' Union in London. But unlike most theories formed by students in London, this one survived the first impact of homecoming. (NLE 38)

We can recount two distinct reasons for Obi's disrespectful treatment toward the old Africans. The first reason twigs in the trashes of relationship between the whites and the blacks, which is based on master/slave relationship. For example, Mr. Omo and Mr. Green's relationship reminds Obi of the relationship between the

black headmaster and the white school inspector in Obi's school days. Mr. Omo is a typical old African submissive servant who calls Mr. Green as his master. The second reason of Obi's hatred of old Africans serves his firm belief that loop the prominence of education and triviality of African traditions and culture. Obi himself do not realize the depth of his Westernization. Although he loves his country, he is deeply attracted towards European culture due to which when he returns from England he can no longer hold a peaceful bonding with his family, the Umuofia Progressive Union and the whole culture of old Nigeria.

In some instances, Obi look like a European rather than an Ibo. He does not allow Umuofia Progressive Union, his father, and his tradition to give any opinion on his decisions. He himself takes decision on his education and marriage. European education alienates him from his people:

'You cannot marry the girl,' he said quite simply

- *'Eh?' - 'I said you cannot marry the girl.'*

- *'But why, Father?'*

[...] 'But all that is going to change. In ten years thing will be quite different to what they are now.'

[...] Obi repeated his point again. What made an osu different from other men and women? Nothing but the ignorance of their forefathers. (NLE 132-34)

After knowing that Obi is ready to marry an Osu woman Obi's father warns him not to do so but Obi counters his father's words. Obi's disobedience hurt his parents and their tradition. Osu is an outcast in Nigerian traditional culture and to marry him/her is forbidden. Obi's European beliefs pull him to marry an osu. Nevertheless, the society and his parents mystify Obi's thoughts. Obi is caught between Christianity and modernity or to convention and tradition. The cultural conflict has multiple dimensions here. In the tribal society, adultery, and marriage connects to polygamy is not mentioned. But in No Longer at Ease, Achebe portrays the problem of marriage among the western educated elites and depict the sexual affair-outside of marriage- between Obi and Clara. Due to the Western education and European life style their love life becomes miserable. This novel presents the conflict between Ibo society and the colonial domination that strikes the personality, psyche, and identity of the African people.

The colonized internalize the myth of inferiority complex by education system. Here the colonizers form the knowledge of their colonies. In this process, the colonized start hating his selfhood, language, history, religion, and values. Hence the native elites embrace the colonizer's attitude, morality, and values. European education system, in a colonized country guides native elites in such ways that they reject their own traditional rules. Educated people play an important role in tribal colonized

society. People in the village compete with each other to send their sons abroad for education. It can be seen in the lines below.

“Greatness is now in the things of the white man. And so we too have changed our tune. We are the first in all the nine villages to send our son to the white man’s land” (NLE 54).

Obi after returning from England he starts to disrespect the local tradition, and his previous belief that the Nigerian education system is capable of changing the society for better changes. Despite his family and Umuofia Progressive Union’s warning, he decides to marry Clara which too is overlooking tradition. Joseph, Obi’s friend tries to explain Obi that education and educated people are not qualified to cause revolution and they are only “pioneers”:

“Look at me, Obi.” Joseph [...] “What you are going to do concerns not only yourself but your whole family and future generations. [...] In future, when we are all civilised, anybody may marry anybody. But that time has not come. We of this generation are only pioneers.” (NLE 75)

Joseph believes that any aspects of reform in Nigeria should be calculated and cautious. In contrast, Obi hurries to put the new values in the place of old ones. Obi indicts Joseph of having a colonial mind set and tells Joseph that a pioneer should make great changes to the Nigerian society. On the one hand, Obi feels a kind of betrayal to his cultural heritage while studying English literature. He loves his native language but at the same time, he is delightful with English language. Obi like many other elites in the country is torn between his thinking in Ibo community and the new ideas, developed by his European education:

Four years in England had filled Obi with a longing to be back in Umuofia. This feeling was sometimes so strong that he found himself feeling ashamed of studying English for his degree. He spoke Ibo whenever he had the least opportunity of doing so. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to find another Ibo-speaking student in a London bus. [...] It was humiliating to have to speak to one’s countryman in a foreign language, especially in the presence of the proud owners of that language. They would naturally assume that one had no language of one’s own. (NLE 49-50)

On the other hand, Obi’s shifting from studying law to studying English literature denotes his devotion to English culture. Chapter three of the novel shows Obi’s deep interest in the T. S. Eliot’s poetry, the one who believes that the tradition of English literature and the values of Western classics are superior. Clara, who is also studying in England, does not understand Eliot’s poetry, but she adores movies created in the West. Both of them are besotted with the Western culture and products accordingly. Fidelity to European culture, a product of

colonialism, can be observed in the conduct of many other black characters.

The members of the Umuofia Progressive Union are very much proud of Obi it is clear as they proudly repeat it, he is graduated from England. Obi’s family and the people of his home village hold a feast for him and they wait eagerly to see how education in England has transformed Obi. Reader can expect people’s perplexity after observing Obi’s conducts that resemble a person just graduated from an English university. When Obi returns from England, the Umuofia Progressive Union books him a hotel room but he instead of staying at the hotel room decides to stay with Joseph. The decision astonishes Joseph, as he considers it improper for a man with a degree from an English university to stay in a friend’s home: -

“I’m moving out of this filthy hotel tomorrow morning and coming into your place.”

Joseph is amazed, and also very pleased at the same time. He tries to raise another objection, but it is clear that his heart is not in it.

“What will the people of other towns say when they hear that a son of Umuofia returned from

England and shared a room in Obalende?”

“Let them say what they like.” (NLE 36)

Here, Joseph embodies the opinion of Nigeria’s public and their estimation of European Education. Consequently, when Obi appears at his graduation ceremony held by Umuofia Progressive Union, Joseph and others are frustration over Obi’s casual dress and his informal English. The president of the Umuofia Progressive Union is dressed for the occasion and gives speech in full and formal English collecting the audience’s enjoyment and appreciation. The audience’s interest in the president’s fluent English presents the magnitude of their attraction towards the coloniser’s language. In the same chapter and in another setting, when Obi and Joseph go to a restaurant owned by an old English woman, Obi astonishes Joseph by his preference of Nigerian food over English food. When Joseph utters his surprise at Obi’s taste, Obi tells him that he likes Nigerian food better, because he is tired of eating “boiled potatoes” (NLE 34).

It seems that Obi is not fully aware of his status and prestige as a man who has just been graduated from an English university. The narrator cites that the restaurant that they visit is a place for English colonialists and well-to-do Africans who visit the place for English food. It is one among the places where the educated and wealthy Nigerians visit and learn European ways of life. In spite of all the concern for their country, educated Nigerians admire English men consciously and unconsciously. We can see Sam Okoli, the black skinned minister of the state concedes the white men’s part in helping Nigeria. According to him Nigeria belongs to the black and white

men must leave it, whereas, he thinks that the white men assisted the black to rule their own country.

Language also plays an important role in imperial oppression and diffusion of culture in *No Longer at Ease*. Language functions as a weapon for the colonizer to construct 'truth' and 'reality'. Different dialects of language are marginalized by the educational system and makes English as the 'standard' version of language as the rule.

In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe uses three languages in this novel - Ibo, Pidgin, and English. Ibo is the language of the Ibo people of Eastern Nigeria. Obi and other characters speak Ibo as well as English. Ibo depicts the language of traditional Africa and brings a sense of kinship.

When Obi returns to Nigeria, by adapting Western lifestyle Obi takes a distance from his people and community. In Lagos, Obi picks English for most of his communication. Sometimes he even fails to find a suitable Ibo proverb when he wants to use it. As a subject of his education, English becomes a norm of social position and prestige for Obi. For Obi, English hints the participation in "the shining elite" (NLE 98). English creates African 'European' and as "been-to," a local term for those who have 'been-to' the West. Obi feels like a European and he challenges his own traditional beliefs, for example marrying with an osu. Obi and some other characters like Christopher, use English language to show their power. Obi's authority is depicted through English language when he speaks with his servant, Sebastian:

'The fridge must be switched off at seven o'clock in the evening and on again at twelve noon. Do you understand?'

'Yes, sir. But mean no go spoil so?'

'No need to buy plenty meat at once.'

[...] *'Yes, sir. Only I tink you say I go de go market once every week.'*

'I said nothing of the sort. I said I would only give you money once.' (NLE 100)

Obi speaks in English while his servant speaks in Pidgin, as pidgin gives a sense of un-authority and inferiority.

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Nevertheless, Obi turns to Pidgin from English to show his relation with urban people. Such as, when he speaks with the boys in the parking place, "na me go look your car for you,' chorused three of them at once.' Ok, make you look am well" or when he talks with Sam Okoli's steward (NLE 110).

The hybridity of Obi's cultural identity and fluctuation of his situation is presented through intentional shift from English into Pidgin, Ibo and vice versa. Language links an individual to his culture in multicultural community; hence, language is medium to show different attitudes toward life.

Conclusion

Achebe's portrayal of Nigeria is akin to Edward Said's description in *Orientalism*. Achebe has created a number of African and British characters, described their relationship and attitudes towards each other to accentuate the dark aspects of colonialism. Like many other Europeans, he is affected by orientalist education and texts. As discussed above, the black characters in *No Longer at Ease* too are affected by colonization which has resulted in diffusion of English culture. For example, Nigerian people's eagerness to send their children to study in western English institutions, their eagerness to dress like Europeans, willingness to speak in English leads to rejecting their "own-self" and thus paves way to imitating the colonizers, hence leading to cultural diffusion. In the novel, because the Nigerians think too highly of English language, England, and its universities, they expect Obi to be a superman. This displays the inferiority complex of the Nigerians. The stereotypical illustration of Africa and African people has created a false and negative "self-image" for the black people. Hence, the experience of colonialism and the exposure to European culture has distorted African people's self-image. Achebe depicts that the European analysis of African culture and people is grounded on the goals and intention of Western orientalists. It is based on a binary opposition of Europeans and non-Europeans.

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