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

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No Longer at Ease, which received the Nigerian National Trophy for literature, focuses on a young Nigerian man, Obi Okonkwo, who has lost connection with his African tradition and develops almost an extreme dislike for the ruling privileged of which he is a part. After going away to England to get an education he wishes he can help all Nigerians, he returns home and finds helpless. Because of walls set in front of him such as, the neo colonial values of the Europeans, he wasn't able to do the things he wanted to do for his people. So most of the African nations that became independent in the nineteen-sixties could only fly flags of political independence. Their economies were dependent on Europe. The movement of independence brought in only a change of masters.

With the arrival of the White man there is a loss of indigenous values such as communal harmony, placing society above self, respect for old and worship for achievers, which resulted in the lack of self analysis and a stable code of moral values in the society of pre independent Nigeria. Tempted by western education and well-paid employment, the youth of the nation do not hesitate to bend down to the levels of corruption and dangerous non-judgmental attitude.

During the colonial period, the colonized world undergoes a drastic change. The chief characteristics of these periods are industrialization and urbanization. The novel presents the conflict between the two forces tradition and modernization. The development of urbanization and modernization gave way to dishonesty and bribery. The protagonist in *No Longer at Ease* belongs to the new generation. He is the grandson of Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart*. Obi Okonkwo is the representative of the modern Nigeria.

The aim of Obi Okonkwo is to free the Nigerian people from corruption, bribery, obscenity and immorality, which they have learned from White man. The numbers of changes were brought about in the Nigerian constitution after the Second World War. Nigerians were leading towards a self-governance because every new constitution unites the colonial power over the affairs of Nigeria. As the title itself suggests that the protagonist is not at all at ease, the protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, is a progressive and learned man. He is educated in the west and is well versed with the western force for freedom aiming at the cultural and political liberty.

The central character of *No Longer at Ease*, Obi Okonkwo, is a "representative of the young and educated Nigerians at this point of time." (Killam, G.D.1969. *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* London: Heinemann, New York. African Publishing Corporation. 37) But corruption is so deeply rooted in the Nigerian society that it becomes almost impossible to get rid of it. His effort of cleansing his soil from the corruption remains simply a dream. He fails to save himself from being tempted by the spoilt system. He who struggles to swim against the flood is seen swimming with the flood and finally he surrenders himself to corrupting system.

The novel opens with a scene in a court room where he is sentenced to imprisonment. The entire manuscript is a long flashback. There are a number of illustrations in the novel, which shows the bribery is deeply rooted in the Nigerian society. "Achebe does in *No Longer at Ease* 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.” (Wren Robert M. 1980. “Pity, That,” Anarchy in Lagos: *No Longer at Ease*,” Achebe’s World: The Historical and Cultural Context of the Novels of Chinua Achebe, by Wren 48)

Obi Okonkwo arrives in Lagos after finishing his overseas learning in England. When he arrives at the Atlantic Terminal in cargo boat named MV sasa, he goes through the customs official procedure. A young customs official tells Obi that the tax on his radiogram is five pounds. Obi demands a government receipt. The official says that he can decrease the duty to two pounds for Obi. Obi asks how he can do it. The novel also records the way of life of taxi drivers who load their cars and drive at unsafe speeds howling abuse at one another across that roads and traffic police taking too much advantage of the condition and taking bribes from them. Even ministers confess that they take bribes. “*No Longer at Ease* shows the nature and extent of the changes brought by colonial intervention in Nigeria.” (Riddy, Felicity, “Language as a Theme in *No Longer at Ease*” Ed. Innes and Lindfors, 153.)

The degeneration of young Nigerians is very objectively illustrated. In the novel, Nigerians are shown to have little ethical values. Young girls offer their sex to win favours from bureaucrats. About Obi himself, the novel verbalizes: “he had been quite intimate with a few (women) in England...a Nigerian, a West Indian, English girls and so on.” (Achebe, Chinua. 1960. *No Longer at Ease*. London: Heinemann.63.) Because of colonial influence, the virginity of Africa is annihilated.

The members of Umuofia Progressive Union sight at Obi’s fault in an interesting way. They do not see anything bad in Obi is taking bribe but in his accepting such a small sum as bribe and his failure in taking it without others noticing it. The president of the Union does not say that it is disgraceful for a man in senior service to take bribes but he says that it is a thing of shame for a man in the senior service to go to prison for twenty pounds. It is sarcastic that people find fault with Obi not because he took bribe but because he was caught. In the late fifties, this is the condition in Nigeria. It is full of dishonesty in all walks of life social, moral and political. People have become self-centered and corrupt. It is the impact of colonial administration. The social problems like dishonesty and bribery are invention of colonialism. “Indeed, the White man’s administration breeds corruption in African society.” (Palmer, Eustace. 1979. *The Growth of African Novel*.London: Heinemann.,70.)

Obi gets a scholarship to learn in one of the top secondary schools in Eastern Nigeria. He also passes the Cambridge School Certificate with merit in all the eight subjects. He goes to England for higher studies. The Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU) sponsors his higher education. The plan of the union is to collect money and to offer monetary help to send the talented young men of their homeland to get higher education in England. Obi Okonkwo obtains the first scholarship under this plan. But it is to be paying back within four years after the completion of one’s education overseas. All the people express there well wishes and bless Obi for accomplishment. Obi is expected to get a good post, keep his position as the other senior servants achieve.

Obi goes to meetings of Nigerian Students Union, during his stay in London. There he reads a paper in which he presents a theory to solve the problem of bribery in Nigeria. He says “The public service of Nigeria would remain corrupt until the old Africans at the top were replaced by young men from the universities.” (Achebe, Chinua. 1960. *No Longer at Ease*. London: Heinemann.35.) He talks about the same theory while arguing with his friend Christopher, an economist from the London school of Economics. Obi believes that the civil service is corrupt because of these so-called experienced men at the top.

Obi Okonkwo is angry young man of Nigeria. He is unhappy about social and political situation of Nigeria. He gets angry when the custom officer proposes to him that he can cut the duty on the radiogram by taking, bribe. Obi worships his country enormously; he desires to save Nigeria from corruption. The miserable situation of Nigeria turns out to be very hurting for Obi. He thinks upon the situation. Obi is straightforward and practical. He does not like to stay in a luxurious hotel when he comes back from England. UPU is going to bear all hotel expense of Obi. But Obi leaves the hotel and stays with his friend Joseph in a small room. Joseph feels that the people of other city will consider that a gentleman of Umuofia is still backward though he comes back from England so he dislikes Obi to share a small room in a locale where common people live. But obi does not mind about what others say. This urbane culture is forced on Africa by Europe.

Obi gets a job as a secretary to the scholarship board in the ministry of the Federal Government. His responsibility is to study the applications and short-list the names of the candidates. He proposed those who fulfill the requirements to the selection board. The board will select some of them for a scholarship. The selected applicants can go to England with the help of that scholarship. In those days of dishonesty, everyone would try to get such a scholarship. Even a rich would struggle to get a scholarship. Though Obi has a great scope to take bribes from those who are longing for getting their names selected, he is very honest in his job. It put forward that Nigerian people learn all these evil things from Europe. Obi Okonkwo has succeeds initially against bribery. But the protagonist of the novel like any other resident of any postcolonial society finds it impossible to keep the balance between the principles and the practice. However, the situation around does not permit him to persist with his principles.

Obi fails to maintain the affiliation with the people of Umuofian Progressive Union. They wanted him to learn law in England so that he can handle all their land cases against their neighbouring villages after his homecoming. They are disillusioned because Obi studies English Literature. But they are glad in whatever Obi does because at least they have a man of their town in European post in the Senior Civil Service. Obi has to pay back the scholarship to the union in monthly installments each of twenty pounds. Due to some difficulty Obi requests the union to give him four months time before he begins to pay back the loan and the Union grants his demand. Obi fails to keep the delicate relationship with his family. His parents are sad because of his love relationship with Clara. Before his leaving for England, Obi is warns by Rev. Ikedi that he must not copy the young men who marry the white women. After Obi's arrival from England, his villagers feel happy about him because he has not married any white woman. Obi does not bring a white women home but he fall in love with an 'Osu.' (Outcaste) Clara, the girl he loves, is an Osu. Obi becomes civil servant and Clara gets a post as nurse in a hospital. At a very later stage of their love Clara tells Obi that she is an Osu and they cannot get married. But Obi is prepared to marry her even if she is an Osu. Obi's parents are not happy with obi's relationship with Clara. Obi Okonkwo is helplessly caught between two worlds, tradition and the modern. Obi quarrels with his father that they are Christians and for Christ there are all equal. Obi is not ready to listen his father. He thinks that all will change in future. But obi fails to persuade his mother.

Obi is now helpless. He advises to Clara that they should wait for some more time. In the meantime Clara becomes pregnant. Obi wants to abort his baby. But the doctors advise him that the abortion is unsafe and illegal. The doctor tells him that some women may develop complication in such cases. But Obi decides to go through with Clara's abortion. She goes away from Obi's life. It throws light on the complexity of a social problem. It shows the force that rise

upon a young cultured Nigerian in the new age. The family is proud of on Obi's European education and his Government job. Ironically it is the same education, which makes Obi, neglects the OSU aspect in Clara. But the family wants him to value the tradition of Nigeria. And it is at this point; Obi fails to maintain the balance between his Idealism and practice.

Obi is facing financial problems. He has lot of responsibilities. He has to pay back the loan scholarship to UPU in monthly installments twenty pounds each. He sends ten pounds to his parents and in addition to that, he also gives school fees of his younger brother John. He finds it more and harder to manage the money. To maintain his standard as a civil servant, Obi buys a brand new car. He employs a driver also. He has also to pay the insurance premium, which grows to forty-two pounds a year. His recurring expenses include the wages for his houseboy, Sebastian, and a payment of ten shillings and six pence every month for the garden boy who works in the common garden of their building. The financial pressures keep growing up. Obi commands his houseboy to lessen all expenses. He takes an overdraft of fifty pounds from the bank to overcome the situation. His problem becomes most terrible because his mother falls seriously ill. He sends thirty-five pounds to pay for her cure in a private hospital

Obi's over mounting troubles do not permit him to go to Umuofia to attend his mother's funeral. He simply sends money for his mother's funeral. The people from obi's village criticize Obi for not attending his mother's funeral. They call him a beast. He feels shamed. His nights become restless because of the following income tax payment, the bank overdraft, and Clara's fifty pounds. He has also to pay back the loan taken from Hon'ble Sam Okoli to bear the expenses on Clara's abortion. Obi's growing requirement for money no longer allows him to stick to his idealism. Unable to overcome the crisis he begins to take bribes. He is feeling guilty. But he convinces himself by rejecting to take bribe from people about whom he knows that he cannot help out. He takes bribes from only those people who are already on the shortlist. He thinks that at list he is not depriving anybody.

Now Obi starts to take bribes from number of his visitors. It incorporates girls with whom Obi goes to bed. He becomes a very different man from the one who fights with Christopher on the issue of sleeping with innocent girls and doing them a favour. After some period he clears off the bank overdraft and all his debt. But he does not stop taking bribes. Bribe becomes a daily habit for him. Now he has become a part of the mechanics of dishonesty. A day comes when he is caught by police and arrested. The judge sentences him to custody. Everyone surprised why he has done so.

The white forces those are too strong for him to fight. He who dreams of cleansing Nigeria of corruption but he fails. He starts taking bribes. It provides the European bureaucrat Mr. Green with a chance to comment that "African is corrupt through end through." (Achebe, Chinua. 1960. *No Longer at Ease*. London: Heinemann, 3.) To the colonizers everything white was right and noble. In the conflict with the colonial forces, Obi gives up the struggle and succumbs to corruption. Obi stands as a metaphor of all the young men in the third world countries that were ruled by colonial authority. Achebe emphatically speaks for Africa and asserts that Africa had its own glorious culture. The white regime destroyed this pristine culture.

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