

Cultural Oppression in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe has established himself among the English-speaking African writers and his writings represent the social and political situation of Africa in a realistic way. His writings give a picture of colonial history that cause repulsion and turmoil within the Nigerian society. His novel, *No Longer at Ease*, won the Nigerian National Trophy for Literature. It asserts the story of Obi Okonkwo, a Nigerian man, who struggles to live a faithful life with his culture. It centers on a young man's life, who finds hard to live with his native culture. His journey towards England for education from his village Umuofia creates a sort of conflict, but when he returns to his village, he feels culturally oppressed. This paper examines the problems of the individual and the community of Africa who are equally experience oppression while reconstructing their own culture.

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native culture. His journey towards England for education from his village Umuofia creates a sort of conflict, but when he returns to Umuofia, he feels culturally oppressed. This paper examines the problems of the individual and the community of Africa who are equally experience oppression while reconstructing their own culture.

Throughout the novel, *No Longer at Ease*, the novelist brings out the oppression in different forms of conflict and struggle. The novel sets just before the independence of Nigeria. The protagonist Obi Okonkwo spends his days both in Umuofia, Nigeria, and in Europe. He spends his earlier days in native Nigeria and for his higher education, he moves to England. Nigeria is a country that has already experienced the cruelty of colonialism and knows something about the Western culture out of colonization. Obi is a man who feels oppressed and finds hard enough to survive between the two cultures.

At the beginning, Obi's journey from Umuofia to England makes him feel the virtuousness of the new culture and questions his own culture. When he returns after education to Nigeria, he feels culturally alienated. He identifies that there are no security and comfort in his own culture and community. He feels culturally oppressed among his natives when he is returned from England where he completes his B.A. degree. He is determined to go out of his country and to create a better nation. David Carroll comments on the conflict that arises within Obi on these two cultures,

To the Europeans it is inconceivable that someone who has had the privilege of a Western education should not adhere to the rules of conduct it enshrines. To the Africans of Umuofia it is disturbing that their most learned offspring, who has been educated for the glory of the clan and to look after their interests, should be so incompetent in the elementary conventions of bribe taking. (63)

On the other hand, Obi develops an affair with Clara, an osu and a descendent of slaves within the Igbo community. According to the tradition of Igbo she has to live apart from the other people. Though, Clara is in the fetters of social customs, she wants to live as a normal African woman and identifies herself genuine and professional. She doesn't like to see Obi in a trap as she knows the value of her caste in the Igbo society. She never accepts the proposal of marriage anticipated by Obi. As her thought, Obi's mother also doesn't allow him to take Clara as a bride because of her osu community. His mother too rejects her and says Obi: "If you want to marry this girl, you must wait until I am no more. If God hears my prayer, you will not wait long.... But if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself" (108). Thus, Obi does not get the consent of his mother regarding Clara. At once he left the village in an angry mood, and decided not to marry Clara. Micere Githae - Mugo finely observes: "Obi's moral begins to crumble with the Clara crises and disintegrates with his mother's death. More specifically, it is loyalty to his family and particularly towards his mother that brings about the break with Clara and that then contributes to his ensuring corrosion" (156).

The difference between two generations in the matter of culture is also conveyed through *No Longer at Ease* by Achebe. Obi's father too warns him that, "Osu is like leprosy in the minds of our people.... not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family" (107). But Obi is willing to accept Clara without approving the values of the past. Because he is no longer belongs to the old society. He has obtained an education from England which is chosen by his own Igbo community. After receiving the western education he reflects himself an independent man of the society. Achebe himself comments on the character of Obi, "His abortive effort at education and culture, though leaving him totally unredeemed and unregenerated, had nonetheless done something to him-it had deprived him of his links with

his own people whom he no longer understood and who certainly wanted none of his dissatisfaction or pretension” (Ghosh 45).

Obi gets upset from the behavior of his parents. He goes off from his family, from his community after knowing that his actions are not loyal. Soon he comes to know about the pregnancy of Clara. Clara is humiliated by her family and society after the rejection of Obi. So she decides to abort her child. She loves to fade away from the life of Obi. Obi tries to convince her in all ways but she doesn't. At this time he hears the death news of his mother. It morally and emotionally oppresses the life of Obi. Because of his mistake, he couldn't attend the funeral of his mother. He suffers of financial crisis and does nothing with the job he has. So he becomes corrupt to settle his financial position, but he is arrested and sentenced to prison.

In the life of Obi, the Umuofia Progressive Union plays a very important part because it is basically concerned with the traditional values of Africa. But as a man educated in the western university, Obi finds hard to adjust with the union. The Umuofia Progressive Union has been helping the younger people of Africa with social, cultural and financial assistance and makes them to sacrifice everything for the sake of their community. The union alone penetrates the western individualism in the minds of the younger people in the name of education and disturbs their peace of mind. When Obi was arrested for corruption, the union refused to stand with him, but the president himself involves in the matter by saying: “A kinsman in trouble had to be saved, not blamed; anger against a brother was felt in the flesh, not in the bone” (4).

The people of Nigeria live in dilemmatic condition whether to accept the culture of the natives or the culture of the western people. As a victim of this situation, Obi also faces the same and it makes him to be corrupted in his own society. He also loses his mother and

his beloved because of the understanding of two cultures. As a man who fails to prove his identities, he hopelessly traps in the fetters and falls prey to corruption by accepting bribes. Finally, he feels isolated.

The depiction of the struggle between the native and the western culture alienates Obi from his responsibilities. Although, he doesn't love to continue in his traditional Umuofian culture or to the western culture. But the education makes him to act as a literate. The educated people in Nigeria, like Obi, are fascinated by the western culture and that creates the cultural crisis. The western education makes the people to think for a cultural change. The cultural issues are emerged due to the influence of the western education. The young people are dispossessed from their own culture and love to adopt the alien values in the name of modernity. The oppression of the traditional values and the acceptance of the educational values are considered the responsible factors for dislocation of Nigerian culture.

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