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Shadow of Death, and the Pastiche that is Obi Okonkwo: A Reevaluation of Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* perfectly captures the ongoing plight of a colonized nation that is going through massive transitions. Though the character of Obi, Achebe sets out to map the future that Nigeria is headed towards which is dialectically interlocked with the past it has experienced. Extensive work has been done to carve out the literary parallels to and allusions mentioned in the novel. In this article I would like to argue how the character of Obi and his spiritual death allegorizes the fragmentation of the nation as a whole; how his fragmentation also stems from language, both Igbo and English, through which Obi fails to coherently express himself; furthermore, this paper would also try to establish religion's link to the same fragmentation. This article also points to a lacuna which will, hopefully, be filled and takes the research available in this area further.

Keywords: Fragmentation, Modernity, Language, Postcolonial, Religion

Of the African Trilogy that traces the transformation of Nigeria, and the Nigerian consciousness, from a pre-colonial era through the colonialism to independent Nigeria, *No Longer at Ease* is perhaps the most menacing one because the novel portrays a transition period for the whole of a nation which is inextricable from its people, that is to say, the people of the soon to be independent Nigeria too was going through a transition hitherto unimaginable, a transition that took place on the individual level but also community-wise, a transition which is reminiscent of modernity that left the individual hollow and fragmented, without a real sense of themselves. Gikandi describes this period of transition crucial, short of any rhythmic development because Nigeria "had yet to evolve linguistic and cultural figures for a new national consciousness" (81). Throughout the novel, there are two opposing forces at play that threatens to consume the other to the point of assimilating it into one body, while at the same time, lacking precisely that quality. This ambivalent stance of the old and the new, the 'pure' and the 'mixed', of tradition and modernity, of individualism and community, is perhaps true of any nation that is trying to shed its colonial identity which is seen, more often than not, as erasing the national identity. Contesting the colonial modernity, and the

subsequent encompassing of traditional Igbo culture, Achebe himself has argued, "The success of [Ibo] culture was the balance between the two, the material and the spiritual... Today we have kept the materialism and thrown away the spirituality which should keep it in check" (The role of the writer in a new nation, 158).

On his solitary quest to individuality, I say 'quest to' because the realm of solid individualism remains for him unreachable, a not-yet-arrived destination as could be seen from the ending of the novel, Okonkwo becomes what Eliot has called the 'hollow men' in a poem of the same title. Indeed, there is a cause and effect relationship that renders Obi into a mere shell of a human, but the first thing that makes him unable to articulate his position, rather his very self, is language. Obi's foreign university education has made him fluent in the colonizer's tongue which, in turn, has stunted his Ibo, and in returning to his fatherland he is suddenly confronted with the reality of it all, that is to say, Obi returned to a nation that is still grappling to assimilate and adapt English to the Nigerian scene. This transitional vacuum could also be transposed onto the brewing tension between the old and the new. For example, Obi correlates the overgrowing corruption in the Nigerian government with the old generation populating and being in charge of those higher governmental posts. Obi's condition could best be described using John Pepper Clark's term 'a citizen of two worlds'. As the term indicates, if someone is of two worlds, can that person ever possess the concept of the idealistic 'home'? Being of both worlds indicates, he belongs to neither of the worlds and is cursed with lifelong migration between the two. The Ibo spoken in *No Longer at Ease* bears similarity to that of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, that is the spoken language is laden with proverbs and the images used in the language are drawn from the quotidian Igbo life which makes it difficult for people unfamiliar with the Igbo culture to grasp the core meaning of its utterance. The fact that the Igbo proverb is being translated into another language, in this case, English, also serves towards making it rather unfamiliar, and in a sense, inaccessible. I am citing two examples among many from the novel: "Here is a little child returned from wrestling in the spirit world and you sit there blabbing about Christian house and idols, talking like a man whose palm-wine has gone into his nose" (41).

Greatness has belonged to Iguedo from ancient times. It is not made by man. You cannot plant greatness as you plant yams or maize. Whoever planted an iroko tree- the greatest tree in the forest? You may collect all the iroko seeds in the world, open the soil and put them there. It will be in vain. The great tree chooses where to grow and we find it there, so it is with the greatness in men (43).

It would be interesting to note here, the use of imagery and comparison were drawn from nature: 'palm-wine', 'iroko tree'. The 'earthiness' expressed in everyday spoken language connects the Igbo community with its roots, the earth, nature, and by means of association, is opposed to everything foreign and superficial. Obi's displacement perhaps is rooted in his

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inability to align himself with not only the community but also the language that essentially eludes him. Felicity Riddy argues that the Ibo style symbolizes a whole way of life:

...ceremonial, ordered, governed by traditional wisdom and rooted in the soil. It is the way of life practised by the Christians and the adherents of the old religion of Umuofia alike. Both retain, for example, an element of ritual in daily living in the ceremonial breaking of kola. In fact, Christianity has not swept aside the traditions of Umuofian societies completely as it seemed about to do in *Things Fall Apart*; in certain areas it has accommodated itself to them (3).

Despite being set in a patriarchal society, speaking of Ibo not only establishes kinship among the men, but it also permeates into establishing an intimate relationship with women also, albeit outside that said society, for example, Obi notices about Clara that "...she had spoken in Ibo, for the first time, as if to say, "We belong together; we speak the same language" (25). However, as we become more acquainted with Obi as the action of the novel progresses, in hindsight, it could also be that since Obi was returning from his long stay at the U.K. this sudden sense of kinship that he developed with Clara had more to do with grasping for nostalgia and comfort that is solely associated with the delusional concept of the warmth of a 'home' as opposed to the world, in this case, a foreign nation and its culture, that in reality could never be attained, than his romantic feelings towards her. Needless to say, Obi is already refracted, and he had hoped that this familiarity would act as an anchor. In arguing about the fractured self, and modernity in Nigeria which Achebe explores mainly through menfolk of the nation implies what has been grossly overlooked: the plight of the 'modern' women. The women we meet in the novel, including Clara herself, a faux sense of freedom, albeit they enjoy the nightlife, attractions that Lagos has to offer; however, except for the passing mention to their promiscuousness, the writer does not give them any agency or explore their world which is always hidden from men and is often constructed by their own intimate language unknown to the outside space, safe from the male gaze. If a writer is to construct the idea of a fragmented nation, leaving out women from that narrative would be to partially examine what the writer has set out to undertake. Clara helps Obi when he is deep in financial trouble, and she seems to be more in control than Obi, and unlike him, she does not seem to possess any dubious idea of modernity, in that, she is not disillusioned with the state of the society that they are a part of. This is obvious when she breaks her engagement off with Obi because she is fully aware that their community is still a long way from accepting her kind into their clan; on the other hand, we have Obi who seems too sure of himself only to discover that he lacks a core. It should make for a critical feminist analysis of the novel, but it falls outside the scope of this paper.

Obi's education seems to have given him a sense of individuality which in turn provided him with the idea that he had been able to break free of the constraints of the world of the Igbo clan. On Obi's part, this is a conscious moving away from the customs and

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traditions of the Igbo community as can be seen in his insistence on marrying Clara, an *osu* girl. His restrained relationship with Igbo becomes apparent when he starts to lose control over it. He stumbles over the words while praying in his father's house, he is often searching for proverbs which is one of the main elements of Igbo. Despite the gradual severance with his native tongue, Obi takes immense pride in the language and the kind of community living and way of life it indicates. The same cannot be said about Obi's attitude towards the use of English. For him, English comes from a place of formality, that lacks intimacy,

'Hello, Peter. Hello, Bill.'

'Hello.'

'Hello.'

'May I join you?'

'Certainly.'

'Most certainly. What are you drinking? Beer? Right Steward. One beer for this master.'

'What kind, sir?'

'Heineken.'

'Yes, sir.'

'We were talking about this young man who took a bribe.'

'Oh yes.' (3)

The repetition of formal greeting lacks any warmth that could otherwise be observed, rather felt, if the greet were to take place in Igbo. Obi's retention of the values of Western education and the Igbo language coupled with the simultaneous disregard for the colonizer's language and Igbo traditions created a unique quality within Obi that could have been transcended into the 'Third Space', but what Achebe seems to be suggesting here is that a country that is on the threshold of independence, a country divided into the young and old, has not made peace with what had come before them, that it eventually created a vacuum where people essentially became refracted. Riddy argues that

English as a medium of exchange is inadequate for Obi because its formulas inhibit genuine self-expression: decorum governs speech just as etiquette governs behaviour. Consequently, Obi's political idealism is not translated into action, but instead is finally compromised by society's demands upon him. He challenges the values of Umuofia from the vantage point of English; to challenge those of Lagos would mean 'fashioning out a new tongue' (9).

Obi becomes self-aware of his lack of identity only when his mother opposes his decision of marrying Clara. His mother's threat that if he marries her, she will die only sides with the interest of the Igbo clan who expressed a similar, only less extreme, sentiment towards Obi. Obi explains his deep connection with his mother, "For some reason or other, whenever Obi thought affectionately of his mother, his mind went back to that shedding of her blood. It bound him very firmly to her" (60), and it is only when this blood-tie is severed, that is after

his mother's death, that he fully severs his connection with the Igbo clan; by refusing to go to her mother's funeral he announces, both to his Igbo kinsmen and the readers, that he has successfully shed, or rather turn his back to, the Igbo community and tradition, that he feels 'like a brand new snake just emerged from its slough' (132). But this is achieved through the costly price of his metaphorical death, a death, which according to Walter Benjamin confers meaning on a life:

He no longer felt guilt. He, too, had died. Beyond death there are no ideals and no humbug, only reality. The impatient idealist says: 'Give me a place to stand and I shall move the earth.' But such a place does not exist. We all have to stand on the earth itself and go with her at her pace. (133)

One of the succinct commentaries on the theme of *No Longer at Ease* is given by G. D. Killam who argues that it is the Nigerian society itself which is 'no longer at ease', however, the unease centres on Obi. Indeed, Obi somewhat becomes the spokesperson for the young generation of Nigeria, one among many of the individuals who were fated with the same uneasiness. One other point of conflict that raises itself in the course of the novel and which also serves as some sort of social commentary is that between traditional beliefs and Christianity. This tension between the traditional belief and Christianity also finds a central argument in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's (one of the writers from the third generation of Nigerian writers) *Purple Hibiscus*. Although whereas the characters in Adichie's novels find salvation at the end of the novel, by precisely assimilating the 'Third Space' exemplified best through the image of the hybrid purple hibiscus, the same tension becomes a point of departure for the characters of Achebe's novel. The colonizers came with their white religion that promised salvation, and which differentiated itself using rationalism from the 'heathen' religion of pre-colonial Nigeria. From the very outset of the novel, Achebe has been careful to tread on the question of religion when it comes to the central character. Obi's outlook on religion, either Christianity or otherwise, could be characterized by ambivalence. Perhaps there is no need to make clear Obi's religious affinity, but there is no denying that Obi had drifted apart from the religious sentiments while studying abroad; while in any other context, this departure could be negligible or of no importance, but in a colonized country that is trying to break free of its shackles, denying the 'word of god' could be interpreted as covertly denying that very basis of colonization. This is not to say that the Europeans spread over the globe colonizing because they wanted to spread the benevolent character of Christ, rather I am trying to posit that colonization and its ugly, horrific underbelly has been justified using, in each and every case, the tool of religion where Christianity has been equated with civilized Europeans, as opposed to the non-civilized 'Other', which gave the European masters a false sense of superiority over the colonized subjects. However, Achebe does not grant Obi a complete departure from the bond of religion which is also used to create a marker for identity. The hollowness of Obi becomes clear when in the face of his father's objection to Obi marrying the *osu* Clara "there was nothing in him with which to challenge it honestly"

(109). According to Roderick Wilson in ‘Eliot and Achebe: An Analysis of some Formal and Philosophical Qualities of “No Longer at Ease”’

Obi, therefore, returning with romantic idealism to transform society, or at least to make it more honest, or at the very least to resist corruption himself, finds a society full of conflicting demands. There is no core in Obi with which to resist, no wholeness by which he can stand firm in a society which itself lacks a core. All those around him are divided or fragmentary beings in one way or another... (7)

James Ogude reads Obi’s insistence on marrying Clara as a means for performing his Nigerianness “that would serve as “willed entry into the desired nationalist space, a space transcending ethnic traditions and family loyalties”” (252). However, Obi’s tactic for doing so is rooted deep in colonial grammar which essentially is a discourse on the “doctrines of modernity and Christianity” (Gikandi 11).

Obi’s fragmentation could, therefore, also be attributed to the meeting of incompatible hostile forces much like the Yeatsian gyre of ‘The Second Coming’. The Nigerian society that itself is disintegrating is reminiscent of *The Waste Land*; but in the case of Obi and other characters that we meet in the novel, it is also the language that fails them. One such example would be Joseph, Obi’s countryman, who usually speaks Ibo or pidgin, but when it comes to telephone communication, he puts on the most impressive, sophisticated English, and goes right back to pidgin after hanging up. The government minister, the Hon. Sam Okoli usually speaks in improved English, perhaps owing to his job it becomes a requirement, but he too slips into pidgin. Obi who had been given the nickname of ‘Dictionary’ in school, only responds with informal, devoid of any decorum English as opposed to the Umuofian Progressive Union Secretary’s use of stylized, sophisticated English. Commenting on Obi’s fragmentation, Wilson says, “...yet he lacks a coherent language of the mind in which to unify the world. He has come back across the sea, “...an endless waste of restless, jaggy hillocks topped with white”, to a society fragmented in purposes, visions and languages (which are both the mirror and the instrument of culture) (9).

Obi’s selective participation, or rather retention of both the Igbo culture and the Englishness which is equated with modernity, serves to only deepen the schism. He wants to eat Nigerian food, but cannot seem to shake the taboo it carries with it; he wants to be closer to his community, and be a part of it, but he raises an objection to Clara who has her dresses made in the slums of Lagos. Interestingly, Lagos becomes a space of contestation between the traditional and the modern embodied in its identification with pleasure. It is, as Arjun Appadurai puts it, “a space of contestation in which individuals and groups seek to annex the global into their own practices of the modern” (3). Obi fails to live up to the expectations of the UPU’s members who expect to see a mimic man of western cultures; the narrator points

out, “That was Obi’s mistake Number One. Everyone expected a young man from England to be impressively turned out” (28). James Ogude comments:

Obi struggles to discover his place in the new Nigeria, while the sojourners have no problem moving in and out of the so-called modern and traditional spaces. Unlike Obi, they have no illusion about their sense of history because they carry their traditions with them. But they also can look at both cultures at once, celebrating certain forms of cosmopolitanism while displaying an awareness of local values they are still indebted to (253).

As for those who hold down traditional values expect the travellers to the 'new world' to come back to a place where their allegiance would lie not with the Englishmen and their traditions, but to their community itself, which, they hope, would further facilitate progress within their own community. It is suggestive of an interaction of "a cultural dynamic of reaching out to and signifying affinity with an 'outside', a world beyond the 'local'" (Newell 110).

When the marked money is left on his table he is “paralysed” (135) which marks his spiritual death. The final collapse of Obi’s self is epitomized at the end of the novel described hauntingly through the sexual metaphor of emasculation at the hands of white people. Philip Roger comments:

Pondering the events that brought about the submission of his people to white rule (and which led to the suicide of his heroic grandfather), Obi is tranquil. He even feels “a queer kind of pleasure” when he thinks of how the white man captured and broke the guns of Aninta, an event explicitly symbolizing “the emasculation of the clan by the white man’s religion and government” (178).

The judge and the European community can never fathom how an educated person (especially someone educated at the heart of whiteness) like Obi could commit any crime. What is ungraspable for the Europeans is also the fallibility of European culture. I would like to conclude by reiterating David Carroll’s argument that the novel is a “tragedy of the everyday” (87) and that Obi’s plight only reveals “a disturbing void” (Carroll 87) to the readers.

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