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Reading the Forms of Hybridization in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract:

The paper attempts to study *No Longer at Ease* from the standpoint of hybridization of values by the Ibo society, especially by the protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, within the colonial framework of Nigeria. The protagonist does not find this so-called hybridization—which is mentioned throughout the paper—as a particularly empowering situation because he must constantly balance the demands and expectations of his Ibo clan in his village, Umuofia, on one hand with the British expectations of change and reform among the Nigerians, on the other. This struggle makes him feel very uneasy about his position and ultimately leads to his final tragedy. The theoretical concept of ‘hybridity,’ which is appropriate for the analysis and argument, provides the underlying premise of the work.

Keywords: *colonization, hybridity, identity, Christianity, language.*

Introduction

No Longer At Ease (1960) by the Nigerian author Chinua Achebe is the second book in a trilogy that includes *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. It is set in the context of 1956 Nigeria, four years before the country achieved independence from British colonial rule and as such, the influence of colonization is very much evident in the Ibo society that Achebe portrays in this novel. The two things colonial rule left behind were Christianity and a desire for Western education, which were both deeply embedded in the Ibo society of the time and made the natives undergo hybridization on many levels. So, the portrayal of hybrid patterns of existence in a society that came under the impact of two forces, namely tradition and modernity, in the aftermath of the colonial conquest, is one of the novel's central themes. In

order to understand the theme, it is necessary to examine the novel's numerous characters and how they live their lives while incorporating components of both of these forces.

Hybridity, in the postcolonial context, denotes a condition where there is a cultural exchange in the sense that the subjects retain elements of their own culture while simultaneously assimilating characteristics from their colonial masters. The subjectivities negotiating the contradiction and conflict between cultures respond to that in various ways, thereby doing away with the notion of a unitary identity.

Hybridity thus becomes a means of resisting a unitary identity, emphasizing instead multiplicity and plural identities, existing between cultures (native and colonial master's), in what Bhabha has called the Third Space. (Nayar 92).

The process of hybridization thus takes into account the instability of binary categorizations and their inherent fluidity. The negotiation between two opposites structure, restructure, assert and subvert the power relations between the colonizer and the colonized. In this context, Vivan writes:

In fact, the process of hybridization crosses and therefore re-discusses binary oppositions hitherto considered as compact and distinct, such as native/alien, centre/periphery, east/west, western world/third world, black/white, art/commercial production, man/woman, etc. It also implies a hitherto questionable element of ambiguity, almost a secret flaw. (96)

The protagonist and other characters in the novel *No Longer at Ease* exhibit a strong sense of hybridization by alternately expressing traditional Ibo values and European ones, which can be classified into some of the aforementioned binaries such as 'east/west,' 'western world /third world,' or 'native/alien.' This is evident in light of the theoretical discussion that follows. The fact that Obi Okonkwo struggles to live up to the momentous expectations of both the traditional mores of Ibo society and the demands of the Europeanized society he is now placed in, further exposes it as a 'secret flaw' because it exerts considerable strain on him and puts him perpetually at unease.

Discussion and Analysis

The novel's first apparent instance of hybridity is the concept of naming itself, as we learn that some of the Ibo people go by Christian first names. The 'light of the Gospel'

(Achebe 133) is what Obi's father, a Catechist by profession, strongly believes to set them apart from the 'osu' class who are considered heathens for being dedicated to the worship of heathen gods, though they adopted Christianity later. His name became Isaac Okonkwo after his conversion to Christianity under the influence of the missionaries. However, his birth name was Nwoye, as revealed in the earlier novel by Achebe, *Things Fall Apart*. Even in this novel, *No Longer at Ease*, Obi's father recalls memories from his early life when he had to endure the wrath of his father when he became a Christian. Similarly, the first names of characters like Hannah Okonkwo, Joseph Okeke and Clara Okeke seem symbolical of their hybrid identities, combining Christian first names with Ibo second names. It is noteworthy that Christopher, Obi's friend and someone who acts as a foil to Obi since he has completely adapted to the corrupt colonial administrative practices of the day—something Obi was unable to do—is only assigned the first name in the novel. It symbolically shows that the Christian, more specifically, the European way of life, is prominent in his character. However, even he at one point in the novel declares to Obi that “You may talk about education and so on, but I am not going to marry an osu” (Achebe 144). This highlights how hybridity is ingrained in his character as well, as he too cannot flout some of the customs of Ibo society.

In *No Longer at Ease*, the desire to get a Western education can be seen as the influence of hybridization on the Ibo society. They have formed a Union to financially help their people to go to the land of the colonizers and come back armed with Western education. With the aid of a scholarship cum loan from this Umoufia Progressive Union, the novel's protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, travels from his native Ibo village of Umoufia to England to pursue his studies. Before Obi leaves for his journey abroad, his father gives a customary feast to the villagers, during which Reverend Samuel Ikedi says to Obi,

‘In times past’, he told him, ‘Umoufia would have required of you to fight in her wars and bring home human heads. But those were days of darkness from which we have been delivered by the blood of the Lamb of God. Today we send you to bring knowledge’. (Achebe 10)

Despite the UPU's ambitious desire that Obi pursue law, he studies English literature there. Obi returns from England with a significantly different outlook on life, but he is fundamentally still a Nigerian. Even though he is fluent in English and has studied English poetry, especially A.E. Housman's poems extensively—he even writes poems in the

language—he nevertheless feels the urge to communicate with his fellow Ibo people in Ibo language rather than in English when he is in England.

He also doesn't believe in the superiority of the English language over the many languages spoken in Nigeria, as he acknowledges the fact that native speakers of the English language will never recognize the English spoken by a Nigerian as being of good quality.

But when he had to speak in English with a Nigerian student from another tribe he lowered his voice. 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. (Achebe 39)

As a result, he rejects the idea that in order to speak more presentably in public, he should internalize the appropriate English accent. This brings to notice Frantz Fanon's views in "The Black Man and Language", which is the first chapter of his classic text, *Black Skin, White Masks*. He says:

To speak means being able to use a certain syntax and possessing the morphology of such and such a language, but it means above all assuming a culture and bearing the weight of a civilization. (17)

It is due to this that Obi adopts a different attitude to his fellowmen and the Whites with regard to language. He, as a black man, appears to have "two dimensions" (Fanon 17), and his behaviour is different around white men from that with black men.

When attending social events, such as when he was welcomed warmly by the Umoufians upon his return from England, Obi is also not too anxious to maintain an English appearance. Thus, Obi does not try to internalize and use the English language everywhere, despite being much interested in it.

However, Obi, being influenced by Western modernity and education, challenges other aspects of the traditional way of life. For instance, he is uncomfortable with the fact that his parents and the rest of the Ibo society continue to marginalize the 'osu' class. He thinks that his father should abandon his belief in such archaic practices now that they have become Christians, but cannot convince him fully. Meanwhile, he is unable to persuade Clara, his girlfriend, to marry him since she has remained steadfast in her belief that Obi should never marry a girl from the 'osu' class. This illustrates how Obi's position at the junction of two

forces prevents him from having a singular identity. Instead, he takes on a ‘flawed’ hybrid identity, which does not help him in this circumstance because it causes him to lose commitment to Clara.

Obi is also against the systems of polygamy and bride price, which is another instance of his veering away from tradition. This is evident from the fact that he criticizes Joseph for paying the bride price in order to get a wife. Similarly he thinks that one should be free to marry according to one’s choice without being deterred by any outdated customs of the society. In beliefs such as these, Obi demonstrates his inclination towards modernity. However, he also preserves an attachment with the traditional ways of life as he likes to eat food with his hands like his friends Christopher and Clara.

They were eating pounded yams and egusi soup with their fingers. The second generation of educated Nigerians had gone back to eating pounded yams or garri with their fingers for the good reason that it tasted better that way. Also for the even better reason that they were not as scared as the first generation of being called uncivilised. (Achebe 21)

He also occasionally yearns to be in Nigeria, which is evident from the fact that he wrote a nostalgic poem about his country during his first winter in England and then went on to write many poems thereafter.

The negotiation between tradition and modernity that gives rise to a hybrid mode of behaviour is also seen in the character of Obi’s father, Isaac Okonkwo. As stated earlier, Obi’s father got his Christian name after converting to Christianity. After that, he leads his life as a Christian and has a vocation as a catechist. He reacts against traditional customs like breaking kola nuts in auspicious occasions as this practice is done to appease heathen gods. He asserts that kola nuts are eaten in his house but “not sacrificed to idols” (Achebe 51).

He is also so profoundly awed by the power of the written word that he keeps old books and manuscripts at his home. He believes that the indelible ink in printed books perpetuates the colonizers’ power through time and space. However, he is also quite adamant in his opposition to Obi marrying a girl from the ‘osu’ caste as he believes that it would bring a curse upon later generations. The belief is so strongly rooted in him as he thinks that his son defying traditions is the outcome of his earlier act of defiance against his father when he converted to Christianity.

Obi's mother, Hannah Okonkwo, who is another significant character in the novel, is shown to be more ingrained in traditional Ibo rituals than his father. Despite the fact that Hannah has to follow her husband in his Christian way of life so as to emulate the model wifely behaviour, she is very much rooted in her culture. She told Obi a folk story when he was asked by his teacher at school to tell a story. This she did secretly without letting her husband know about it as he was against the Heathen folk stories and songs.

‘We are not heathens,’ he had said. ‘Stories like that are not for the people of the Church. And Hannah had stopped telling her children folk- stories. She was loyal to her husband and to her new faith. Her mother had joined the Church with her children after her husband’s death. Hannah had already grown up when they ceased to be ‘people of nothing’ and joined the ‘people of the Church’. Such was the confidence of the early Christians that they called the others ‘the people of nothing’ or sometimes, when they felt more charitable, ‘the people of the world’. (Achebe 58)

She is also drawn to Heathen songs and likes to listen to these singers when she is on her sickbed. Moreover, she also vehemently opposes Obi’s decision to marry Clara and gives him the warning that he would have to do so over her dead body.

Initially, she was zealous in her pursuit of the Christian way of life and even prohibited her children from taking food from other Heathen households in the village. Nevertheless, she too cannot innately dislike her own customs. Thus, some form of hybridity is there in Hannah’s character too.

Hybridization due to the colonial administration in Nigeria is also seen in the natives’ expectations of how a man with a European post should behave. The Umoufians expect Obi to speak English perfectly and to dress like a gentleman: “Everybody expected a young man from England to be impressively turned out” (Achebe 26). The Secretary of the Union even delivers a welcome address to Obi in eloquent English.

It is this hybridization that is somehow responsible for the degradation of the Nigerian society and also of the tragedy of the protagonist. The Ibo people of Umoufia have great admiration for the European way of life. Thus they do not expect one of their sons, who was sent to England, to would revert to a diminished social status, after having assimilated into an affluent English lifestyle. About the Umoufians’ societal expectations, it is said as follows:

To occupy a 'European post' was second only to actually being a European. It raised a man from the masses to the élite whose small talk at cocktail parties was: 'How's the car behaving?' (Achebe 92)

Obi's insistence on leading a life befitting of a European civil servant after having secured a job in the Nigerian colonial civil service, is a financial burden on him and it makes him ultimately accept bribes for which he is convicted. Thus, apart from his undeniable family responsibilities and rising debts, in subtle ways, Obi's downfall occurs due to this subliminal expectation always working in his mind:

Having made him a member of an exclusive club whose members greet one another with 'How's the car behaving?' did they expect him to turn round and answer: 'I'm sorry, but my car is off the road. You see I couldn't pay my insurance premium.'? That would be letting the side down in a way that was quite unthinkable. (Achebe 98)

Obi who starts as a young man of principle is compelled to take a bribe like other people in the service. He is at a crossroads between a corrupt old order and a potential new one that might be formed if the youths put their minds to it. Obi experiences the woes of hybridization in this regard as well, but he is unable to strike a balance between the two diametrically opposite ideas. In contrast, characters like Joseph and Christopher who adhere to social conventions, such as paying a bride price in the case of the former or viewing bribery as not an unethical trade in the case of the latter, are happier than Obi. Obi sets out with the noble intention of expunging the administrative system of evils like bribery or breaking down barriers between classes in the field of marriage, but his efforts are in vain. In this connection, a critic writes:

To be fully at ease, he must choose between traditional and Western values. Since he cannot belong to both- a balancing act that few can perform- he finds no peace at novel's end. (Singh 166)

Conclusion

Thus, the novel explores the implications of hybridization on various levels. The myriad ways in which the characters hybridize themselves can be discovered through an analysis of their responses to various circumstances. It is through the "looking glass" of the European gaze that the characters in the novel perceive themselves which lead to their inevitable hybridization. As one scholar writes:

The looking-glass was thus an instrument offered to the Africans so that they could see their own self revealed through the power of a captivating lens - they were to see an « otherized » self, captured in the net of the colonial vision. This process was the core of conversion: the European gaze would then include this new « other » by making him wear the aspect of the colonized object and take up the role of the object. (Vivan 92)

The principal 'looking glass' in the novel is the colonial heritage of Christianity and Western education, which contributed to the conflicted Ibo cultural life and the characters' innate hybridization. The novel's protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, in particular, serves as an example of the flaw in hybridity—the inability to blend in with either Ibo or European society, with the former viewing him as their 'prodigal son' and the latter appalled by his act of corruption despite having got educated in their literature and culture.

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