

Alienation, Acculturation and Ascension in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease.*

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Abstract

All African writers, though in their unique ways, have been concerned in their writings with African tradition, ethnographic practices, consciousness and social structures of their own common, but diversified culture. Chinua Achebe is one of the most-read African writers in English. He has contributed a significant part to the growth and development of the African novels in English. Achebe is the product of two different cultures and two conflicting civilizations. As a result, his fictional characters are rooted from his ethnographic experience. *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe's second novel, pictures the complicated relationship between European individualism and African tradition. Obi Okonkwo, the protagonist encounters a kind of psychological crisis due to acculturation. He underwent 'double colonization', one from European influence and the other from the neocolonial elite. The paper demonstrates the way how Obi, as a educated person, in a hybrid society made a transformational journey in his life. The paper also throws light on Obi's alienation, acculturation and ascension in a distinctive way.

Keywords: African tradition, diversified culture, ethnographic practices, alienation, and acculturation.

The moment an individual strays into unorthodoxy of any kind he threatens the coherence of his society.

Everybody was properly dressed in aghada or European suit except the guest of honor, who appeared in his shirtsleeves because of the heat. That was Obi's mistake number One. Everybody expected a young man from England to be impressively turned out.

- Chinua Achebe.

The concept of acculturation has been studied scientifically since 1918. It has been approached at different times from the fields of psychology, anthropology and sociology. Migration happens to an individual or to a group for satisfying their basic needs. As a result of migration, many societies become culturally plural. That is people of many cultural backgrounds come to live together in a diverse society. In many cases they form cultural groups that are not same in power such as numerical, economic or political. These cultural or power differences are mentioned in different terms ‘assimilation’, ‘cultural hybridity’, ‘culture contact’, ‘culture change’ and ‘diffusion’. In all plural societies cultural groups and their individual members, in both the dominant and non-dominant situations, must handle the issue of a cultural adaptation. Chinua Achebe is one of the most versatile African writers in English. He has contributed a significant part to the growth and development of the African novels in English. Achebe is the product of two different cultures and two conflicting civilizations. As a result, his fictional characters are rooted from his ethnographic experience. Achebe’s trilogy is *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease* and *Arrow of God*. All of these three novels deal with the colonial situation between 1890 and 1960, and its impact on the Igbo society. *No Longer at Ease* is published in the year 1960. Chinua Achebe always believes that the value of African literature lies in its tradition and Africanisms which is in a chaotic state due to its cosmopolitan origin.

Obi Okonkwo, the village boy with a brilliant academic record finds himself no longer at ease, because he stands “cross road of cultures” (83). He wants to remain faithful to the traditional values on one hand, yet he aspires to have a western life style. The conflicting obligation of both value systems contribute to his alienation. What makes Obi truly an isolated being is that, there is no escape from the stranglehold of traditional culture and also the western counterpart. Obi trapped in cross currents intends to live clean and exemplary life and is prepared to play a vital role in eradicating social and economic evils that Igbo undergoes. Obi does not derive comfort from neither to his traditional culture nor from his western culture.

The individual isolation of Obi is largely due to his own indecisive nature and to a certain extent his disadvantageous position. By belonging to neither to the traditional Umuofian culture, nor to the western culture Obi feels alienated. And it is this alienation that account for his tragedy. Obi Okonkwo started to question his Umuofian culture as a result of his western education and Christian wisdom. The Igbos believe

in a super human heritage “Mother is Supreme” is one of their off quoted sayings and beliefs. In keeping with it, Obi holds his mother in high regard and remembers her love and strength of mind and her sacrificing nature. During his four years stay in England he misses the sights and sounds of his mother as well as his motherland.

When Obi returns to Nigeria, he has certain clear ideologies to pursue. He dreams to rebuild a Nigeria with angelic purity “Where does one begin? with the masses? Educate the masses? He shook his head. Not a chance there. It would take centuries. A handful of men at the top. Or even one man with vision – an enlightened dictator” (40). The common struggle of the educated Africans who stand confounded at the meeting point between acceptance and rejection of a life of a hybrid culture is evocatively portrayed in Obi’s character. Obi is shocked and struck down when he hears his mother’s dreams. He understands that, instead of bringing people together, the caste system has widened the gap that prevails among them. His love for Clara is defeated when he is forced to choose between her and his mother.

Obi’s emotional turmoil reaches its height not only due to his love for Clara but also the cross road between two cultures. Okonkwo’s emotional turmoil leads to physical violence, where as Obi’s mental conflict create anarchy within him. His anarchy is evident in his inability to explain to Clara about the hurdles in his way of their marriage. His mother’s death brings pain as well as a kind of relief to Obi.

Obi is indifferent to the pomosity and vainglory of the welcome meeting arranged by the Umofia Progressive Union. Being a man of commonsense he dresses in short sleeves to suit the weather rather than in European dresses. His speech is completely shown in a lofty style than sophisticated English words. Instead of staying in an expensive hotel, he prefers to stay with his friend Joseph. When Obi is split within, with his mind divorced from intellect his reasoning power is lost. Thus, regarding Obi as a man of cultural hybridity T.S. Eliot Says, “Those who are torn on the born between season and season, time and time, between hour, word and word

power and power “ (62). Obi knows well that his society is no longer compact and homogenous. He observes that sweeping out tradition completely is an act in vain:

Cultures change and grow discarding certain archaic elements and acquire new ones in the course of their history. Obi being in a confused state of acculturation rejects to marry Clara

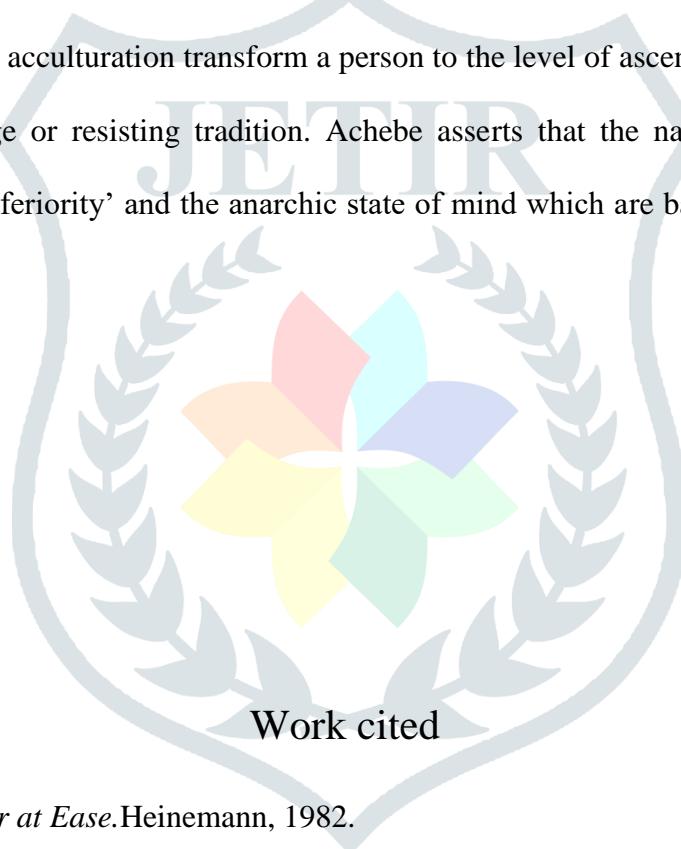
though he could not find a way to forget her. When Obi argues with his father and discloses., whom he want to marry, his father's reaction is unexpected, "Osu is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg you, my son, not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family".(107)

Obi is forced to learn the traditional folk tales in spite of his father's rebuke because of the old ways are still important in his village. His European upbringing and Christian wisdom render him ignorant of certain native social practices such as the payment of bride price, the clans disdain of Osus or even speaking Igbo, his mother tongue , without tumbling. The clash between the two the cultures of the colonizer and colonized does not merely call for the replacement of the old with the new order. It is more than that; this clash unveils the diabolic kind of energy that works against the welfare of the nation and its own people. The city of Lagos is built thoroughly based on corrupt and bribery. It is the result of two incompatible value systems. There incompatible systems create a moral void as the result of the absence of an authentic cultural power. Okonkwo's society was peaceful and existed in idyllic conditions, because they had a definite set of values, one religion to govern their life and one mind to lead them towards perfection, the goal of culture. At first Obi avoids the situations to get bribe for his duty but his financial crisis forced him to accept it. He swings between his native culture and western education.

When cultural conflict arises in the mind of an individual, they will find an inner urge to survive in their own way. This survival or the transcending state of existence has to undergo many conflicts. Obi lacks this steadfast resolution for survival, the most important concept of life. 'Obi's 'reality' is his inability to find a decent scale of values for himself in his predicament of cross-cultural conflict. A fellow folk describes him as "Beast of no Nation", does not seem to be an exaggeration "He no longer felt guilt. He too, had dies. Beyond death there are no ideals and no humbug, only reality' (196).People of Nigeria tries their best to get to the top through the means of offering bribes. Achebe writes "In Nigeria the Government was 'they'. It had nothing to do with you or me. It was an alien institution and people's business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble" (29-30).

Obi as an educated man stands in a chaotic state than his brothers in the bush. Achebe mentions "His abortive effort at education and culture though leaving him totally unredeemed and ungenerated had

nonetheless done something to him - it had deprived him of his links with his own people whom he no longer even understood and who certainly wanted none of his dissatisfaction or pretensions."(92) Achebe portrays a very painful picture of a fragmented and divided society, under the colonial administration. Through the character Obi, Achebe reveals the 'sense of alienation', ambiguity of acculturation and the ceaseless urge of the individual psyche to reach the level of adaptation or ascension. The probable solution for a hybrid society and its multicultural practice is to develop a sense of awareness. Achebe says that, experience is the proper stuff through which one should gain self-awareness. This awareness will help them, masterfully responding to the demands of change. The quintessential aspect of the present paper is to analyze how alienation and acculturation transform a person to the level of ascension, either it is in the form of adapting cultural change or resisting tradition. Achebe asserts that the natives should get rid of the tenacious grip of "moral inferiority" and the anarchic state of mind which are basic hindrance of the higher level.



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