



A Critical Reading of the Theme of Corruption in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*.

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ABSTRACT: Corruption is a common phenomenon in the postcolonial societies. The negative impact of European colonialism on Africa has been evident through corruption that touched all aspects of life. In particular, corruption in Nigeria is considered as an example of other African countries. Consequently, the literary works emerged to play a significant role in revealing the reality and describing the African societies during the colonial and postcolonial periods. This paper aims to study the theme of corruption in Africa during the post independence period through the African novel *No Longer at Ease* (1960) by Chinua Achebe. It examines the author's representation of corruption as a postcolonial problem and the postcolonial aspects in his novel. He has not shown an idyllic Africa, but takes a sympathetic but honest view of a society within its own set of casualties. It shows how through this novel Achebe has tried to give a true perspective of his society. It focuses on the relation between the colonizer and the colonized in addition to the main character's conflict among the Nigerian society after the independence. The novel shows Achebe's emphasis on the superiority of the English culture and depicts how colonialism and western orientalism produce stereotyped images of Nigerians and Obi Okonkwo as corrupt. Consequently, such features have great impressions on the mind of Nigerians, which results in inferiority complex. In this novel, Achebe represents the problem of corruption by using Obi Okonkwo, the protagonist's conflicts.

KEYWORDS: Corruption, postcolonialism, conflict, Nigeria, society.

During the nineteenth century, many African countries were under the domination of the Europeans. At first, the colonialism started as a problem of land and fortune and to use the natural resources of the colonized countries. But later it occupied not only the people themselves but had a

great impact on their culture, identity, and political life during the colonialism and postcolonial periods. As a result of the influence of European colonialism the problem of corruption became evident throughout the African countries, particularly in Nigeria. The issue of corruption has been a phenomenon which has pervaded not only Nigeria but other colonies in Africa for quite a while. In the novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), Chinua Achebe portrays the problem of corruption in the Nigerian society and shows how deep it has eaten into every aspect of the Nigerian civil and business organization. This pervasive corruption has been blamed on colonialism with the most convincing argument that the lifestyle of the Europeans and Nigerians who worked in high positions influenced people holding special positions to receive bribe and misuse their power. The fleet of flashy cars, big houses and clothes used by these people made it even more impossible to turn down a bribe offer, especially in such financial conditions. So strong it was that it made a well principled and strong-willed man like Obi Okonkwo ignore all his values and principles to make money. Through this novel, Achebe presents the main protagonist, Obi Okonkwo who brought together education from the west and adherence to good morals from his original home. Obi Okonkwo is a Nigerian man and his goal was to get rid of issues such as corruption in Africa but due to his failure to overcome the difficulties which he faced after his return to Nigeria led him to be a corrupt man.

Chinua Achebe is considered one of the most influential writers of the African issues in the postcolonial period. He wrote about the African culture and also about the issue of corruption that destroyed the basic political, cultural and economic structure. This paper is based on the corruption perspective through a postcolonial study, it aims to clarify the representation of corruption within the novel. An educated young man from Nigeria who found himself compelled to do illegal acts among



the political system, Obi Okonkwo, the main character, his thoughts are unable to balance between the culture of his own country and the country where he had been studying i.e. Britain. Achebe highlights the corruption in African states because of the influence of colonialism on them. Achebe gradually reveals the problems that Obi Okonkwo faces and ruins his hope to be pioneer to change his country to the best and to remove corruption that the old Africans exercise because the European colonialism makes them live in poverty. In addition, he is shocked by his mother's illness, paying for school fees of his brother and repayment of loans to the union. The novel depicts the newly independent Nigeria where Nigerians tried to rely on themselves to build an independent state in this period. He tries hard to live without corruption and to take care of his family, but the distress crisis destroys him. He starts to take bribe which end him caught by the police.

During the period of transitional phase from colonization to independence, the Nigerian people lived in a new situation known as hegemony. It started in Nigeria after independence. According to Preeti Maneck in *Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease as a Post colonial Novel*, "In the hegemonic phase of colonialism which begins after the country has achieved independence, the natives internalize western culture and the colonizers entire system of values." (Maneck,p-439) The European colonialism on Nigeria was not just a military colonization but it also affected the native people's traditions, values, language, culture and lifestyle of the place. Achebe in this novel along with the colonialist's attitudes towards the Africans also depicts the mental and psychological impacts of colonialism on the native people by creating a false image about them and their life. Then, the author depicts the relation between the colonizer and the colonized in the postcolonial era.

Firstly, in the beginning of the novel the author depicts the supremacy of the western people among the Nigerians which can be still seen active even after the independence through the two characters in the novel, Mr. Justice William Galloway and Mr. William Green. Mr. Justice William Galloway is the Judge of the high court of Lagos and also the Judge of Obi Okonkwo's trial. The Judge was an European man and so it can be said that the Judge resembles western supremacy and a high status in Nigeria. It can be seen from the description given by Achebe about the Judge in the first chapter :

Whenever Mr. Justice William Galloway, Judge of the High Court of Lagos and The Southern

Cameroons, looked at a victim he fixed him with his gaze as a collector fixes his insect with formalin. He lowered his head like a charging ram and looked over his gold spectacles at the lawyer. (Achebe, 2010, p.1)

In the same chapter, Achebe depicts another scene that mentions about Mr. Green's clothes and the Europeans sitting as he says :

After the game they retired to the club bar. Mr. Green had a light-yellow sweater over his white shirt, and a white towel hung from his neck. There were many other Europeans in the bar, some half-sitting on the high stools and some standing in groups of twos and threes drinking cold beer, orange squash or gin-and-tonic.(Achebe, 2010, p.2)

The above instances from the novel reflects the imperialistic features of the western.

Achebe also depicts different binary relations in the novel such as Master/Slave, Superior/Inferior and Civilized/Uncivilized. According to Hegel, for each slave group, there should be a master one. The master in order to recognize himself needs and wants slave's existence and if there is no slave, there might be no master. Master and slave identify their being in the relation of each other, therefore, the existence of the master depends on the existence of the slave. As in the novel Obi Okonkwo tells readers, the time in which Mr. Green lived was different from that of the early colonial days when a British official was free to treat Africans as the way they liked. However, Mr. Green was blind to the changes in Nigeria and continues to live with a typical colonialist's mentality. It can be seen when he orders beer, he tells one of the man near him "one beer for this master" (Achebe, 2010, p.3) The encoded master/slave expressions in his diction, shows his colonial mentality and his false image of the Nigerian people. This way of self-expression corresponds with Edward Said's definition of orientalism as a kind of knowledge, which remains blind to historical changes. According to Said, the continued insistence on "Oriental backwardness" strengthens the superiority of western civilization and serves as a justification for the west's imperialist and colonialist projects on a humanitarian basis. This higher-lower status relation is based on a psychological desire to create a cultural hierarchy between west and east. Meanwhile, the loaded stereotypical images in the literary texts composed about the Orient have reinforced the double-edged classification.

There is another scene between Mr. Green and Mr. Omo, the administrative assistant which demonstrates the master/slave relation. It was the



first day of Obi Okonkwo in the office and he observed how Mr. Green's actions and words with the old Nigerian assistant depicts their relation. Achebe depicts this in the seventh chapter : "Mr. Omo jumped to his feet as soon as Mr. Green came in. Simultaneously, he pocketed the other half of the kola nut he was eating." (Achebe, 2010, p.52) and adds "Mr. Omo hesitated as he always did when the telephone rang, and then took it up as if it was liable to bite." (Achebe, 2010, p.50) Mr. Green loves Nigeria of his imagination and his work because it gives him the opportunity to impose colonial authority on them. In the article, *Dissemination of English Culture in Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease*, Brahman Zarrinjoo and Sahahla Khatar says :

Mr. Green does not like the real Nigerians, but the Nigeria of his imagination. He likes the Nigeria of thick bushes, dirty natives, and submissive servants. He likes his office, because his submissive workers, stewards, and messengers who give him a pleasing self-image as a colonial master surround him. (p.234)

Mr. Green was reluctant to love and accept educated people like Obi Okonkwo, since they refuse confirming his belief in Africa's backwardness. So, when Obi Okonkwo was accused and caught for accepting bribes, he celebrates the event because it proves his opinion towards Africans as corrupt and unchangeable. According to Green, Nigerians go to Universities to gather as much as they can for their family and themselves. They do not care about their countrymen who die on a daily basis due to hunger and many diseases. Mr. Green thinks of Nigeria as a typical orient society bare of history or historical progress. The predominance of corruption and laziness cripple the society to change and recover from the evil of poverty and backwardness. Such a disappointing image of the 'orient', as a society without history, persuades some critics to conclude that the social change can be achieved merely by the hands of colonial powers.

According to the colonizers the Europeans are the superior and the Africans are the inferior. The British colonizers believe that they are the light to the dark Africa and civilization to barbaric and primitive people as the superior and the prominent ones. They impose their culture on the Africans. In the first chapter, Achebe says : "looked at a victim he fixed him with his gaze as a collector fixes his insect with formalin." (Achebe, 2010, p.1) This quotation reflexes the inferior look by the colonizer to the colonized. They insist on the inequality between them and they do not change their views even if the colonized were educated, speak English

and hold on to their culture. Another instance in the seventh chapter, the author represents this relation when Obi Okonkwo responded to Mr. Green in the phone : "Obi took the telephone. Mr. Green wanted to know whether he had received a formal offer of appointment. Obi said, no, he hadn't. You say sir to your superior officers, Mr. Okonkwo, and the telephone was dropped with deafening bang." (Achebe, 2010, p.52) The author uses the language of power and superiority when the British people speak. In the first chapter the author says :

The fact that over centuries the African has been the victim of the worst climate in the world and of every imaginable disease. Hardly his fault. But he has been sapped mentally and physically. We have brought him Western education. But what use is it to him? (Achebe, 2010, p.3)

The civilized/uncivilized is the another relation represented in the novel. This relation can be seen in some attitudes of the Nigerian people. The first instance was in the reception of Obi Okonkwo, speaking formal English is considered as civilization because the old Africans are careful when using English in order to confirm their status in their society. However, in the reception of Obi Okonkwo's English was informal and he did not care about it because he considered himself an educated person who studied in England and he is civilized man like the whites. In this context, in the fourth chapter, Achebe says : "Obi's English, on the other hand, was most unimpressive. He spoke 'is' and 'was'" (Achebe, 2010, p.26) In another instance which is in the second chapter, Achebe says :

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 uncivilized. (Achebe, 2010, p.16)

This shows that the first generation were described uncivilized in contrast to that of the civilized white men.

But, according to Mr. Green even the educated Africans in general and the educated Nigerians in particular are not civilized to get their own life and build their future. Achebe illustrates when Mr. Green reminded Obi Okonkwo about his insurance and he will pay forty pounds each year. Mr. Green's role did not cease to remind Obi Okonkwo but to describe him as incapable of leading life even if he was an educated man. In chapter ten, Achebe says :

You will do well to remember, said Mr. Green, 'that at this time every year you will be called upon to cough up forty pounds for your



insurance, 'It was like the voice of Joel the son of Pethuel. 'It is, of course, none of my business really. But in country where even the educated have not reached the level of thinking about tomorrow, one has a clear duty.' He made the word 'educated' taste like vomit. (Achebe, 2010, p.76)

In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe depicts the theme of corruption in three different aspects : culturally, economically, and politically. The novel starts with the trail scene of the main protagonist so that the readers can recognize the fact of Obi Okonkwo being a victim of several conflicts that he lost in challenging them. The author has shown the end first so that the reader could know about his past he had gone through and about the real reasons behind.

Chinua Achebe through his postcolonial novels depicts the Ibo traditions and how its natives adhere to their customs. He also tries to focus on the Nigerian culture which has existed before the colonization. In this novel, Obi Okonkwo gained western knowledge during his studies in England. After his return from England, he tries to imitate the western culture such as his dressing style, his way of speaking English in front of the Nigerian people. But these behaviors are not accepted by the native people who glorify their culture, traditions and language. As in the fourth chapter, when The Umuofia Progressive Union (UFU) arranged a grand reception in honour of Obi Okonkwo who has just returned from England. Everyone was properly dressed except Obi Okonkwo who was wearing shirt sleeves unlike the educated man to which Achebe refers to as his first mistake : "Everybody was properly dressed in *agbada* or European suit except the guest of honour, who appeared in his shirtsleeves because of the heat. That was Obi's mistake Number One." (Achebe, 2010, p.25) The second mistake that Obi Okonkwo made was that he spoke in informal English in front of the president and Nigerian members.

The people of Nigeria also did not allow him to marry Clara, who was an "Osu" this problem created a big conflict within Obi Okonkwo who really loved Clara. When Obi Okonkwo told Joseph about Clara that he will marry her anyway Joseph was aware of the consequence because he was familiar with both the cultures. He tried to give Obi Okonkwo an advice to not marry Clara and to think carefully about the matter. Obi Okonkwo in the beginning of their relation was confident enough to do anything, ignoring all his traditions and culture. His hope was high that he will be able to convince his family. In the seventh chapter, the author says :

Obi knew better than anyone else that his family would violently oppose the idea of marrying

an *osu*. Who wouldn't? But for him it was either Clara or nobody. Family ties were all very well as long as they did not interfere with Clara. 'If I could convince my mother,' he thought, 'all would be well. (Achebe, 2010, p.60)

The response of Obi Okonkwo's mother was worst in the fourteenth chapter : "she held up her hand for silence. 'But if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself.' She sank down completely exhausted." (Achebe, 2010, p.108) which makes him go through an internal dilemma. The author portrays postcolonial characters to convey the readers about the harshness of some traditions which lead to the internal conflicts within the characters. Obi Okonkwo's parents converted into Christians, which prevents them from practicing parts of their culture, they found themselves acting according to the culture of their community and not to their Christian religion because they belong to this community and cannot completely separate from this culture. Obi Okonkwo's father, Issac Okonkwo insisted on his wife to do not tell their children about their traditional folktales because they are forbidden. Obi Okonkwo's mother, Hannah Okonkwo is a devout Christian woman, but when he was a student in school he was embarrassed because he did not know any traditional story, and his friends used to laugh at him about that. Then, Hannah Okonkwo told him some stories so that could participate, but she kept it secret from her husband. The author says :

Obi loved these stories but he knew none which he could tell. One day the teacher called on him to face the class and tell them a story. As he came out and stood before them he trembled. '*Olulu ofu oge*,' he began in the tradition of folk- tales but that was all he knew. His lips quivered but no other sounds came out. The class burst into derisive laughter, and tears filled his eyes and rolled down his cheeks as he went back to his place. (Achebe, 2010, p.47)

During the colonial period, Nigeria went through extreme poverty because of colonialism. Achebe shows this through the novel how the union grants scholarship to students for studying in abroad and retrieve this amount after they graduate and find jobs as it happened to Obi Okonkwo, which is a reference to the poverty of Nigeria at that time. As Achebe says : "The first scholarship under this scheme was awarded to Obi Okonkwo five years ago, almost to the day. Although they called it a scholarship it was to be repaid. In Obi's case it was worth eight hundred pounds, to be repaid within four years of his return." (Achebe, 2010, p.6) After



Obi Okonkwo's return to Lagos and get a job with a good salary in the civil service, his hope was high to live luxurious life, in addition to the expectations of the people of his town and the Union to repay for scholarship readily because he will be among the rich and educated class, he only has to pay twenty pounds each month to repay for his scholarship to the Union. Obi Okonkwo discovers the poor situation of the family; his mother was bedridden because of her illness. His parents appear weak, but his father can still work in the church which pays him a very little amount, both of them are old to work. Achebe gives a glimpse of it when he says : "They have never relied on his father's meagre pension. He planted yams and his wife planted cassava and coco yams. She also made soap from leaching of palm ash and oil and sold it to the villagers for a little profit. But now they were too old for these things." (Achebe, 2010, p.48) Although Obi Okonkwo spent a lot on his daily life, he takes the responsibility of his family starting from paying the hospital bill of his mother, paying the school fees of his brother. But later he faces extreme financial problems when Mr. Green warns him to pay the forty pounds for his insurance renewal. Obi Okonkwo was very confused about how he will pay because he didn't have enough money in his bank and his salary was not sufficient for that. He spoke with Charles who owes him and he tried to borrow a loan from the bank. On the other hand, Nigeria's financial situation was in a degraded position. Obi Okonkwo was obliged to repay for his scholarship to the union in order to give it to another student to study abroad. So, the only thing he could do was to save money and change his usual expenses.

The political conflict was one of the major issues addressed by Achebe in the novel. He presents the political corruption by taking bribes in the novel. Obi Okonkwo appears as an incorruptible man who aims to eradicate corruption in Nigeria when he returns from England as it is seen in the novel : "Obi's theory that the public service of Nigeria would remain corrupt until the old Africans at the top were replaced by young men from the universities was first formulated in a paper read to the Nigerian Students' Union in London." (Achebe, 2010, p.31) Achebe shows the picture of taking bribes by the power holders who misuses their positions. Among them, he found himself stranger in his own place. He recognizes two African men who took bribes, one of them was in the Public Service Commission. But Obi Okonkwo wanted to remain

pure and considered himself as "pioneer". The political situation was full of corruption, firstly due to the poor financial condition and secondly to compete for senior positions within the political structures. Obi Okonkwo's journey ends when he took bribe from a man who deceived him and gave him to police. Obi failed to remain pure because of his financial pressures, his mother's death and the loss of his love.

Thus, the forms of corruption are the basic themes in the novel during the postcolonial period in Nigeria. Achebe tries to throw light on the problem of corruption through the main character who represents the loyal Nigerian man. It focuses on the colonizer's relation to the colonized and its impact during this period. In addition, the conflicts reflects the theme of corruption in Nigeria and reveals the fact that corruption is represented in the novel through the clash between cultures, the adverse impact of the economic situation and the political systems that deals with bribery.

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