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CHINUA ACHEBE'S *NO LONGER AT EASE*: AN EXPLORATION OF THE INTERNAL DISAGREEMENT IN THE 'IGBO COMMUNITY'

Somnath S. Lokare

Assistant Professor

Department of English

ADPM's Women's College of Arts, Commerce and Home Science

Jalgaon, MS

Abstract:

Chinua Achebe's concerns, in his second novel No Longer at Ease, are not only the conflict within Obi but also to expose the internal conflicts in the Igbo Community. The traditional society is not innocent; it also has some customs, rituals and traditions which not only create conflicts in an individual's life but in the society itself. The members of the society have different beliefs on same subjects and hence conflict between the different views is inevitable. Moreover, the internal conflicts and different world views somehow are responsible for the doom of the hero, Obi Okonkwo. Achebe has tried to outline such internal conflicts in his Igbo society and in Umuofia.

Keywords: *Chinua Achebe, Igbo, Umuofia, Nigeria, Solidarity, etc.*

The major internal clashes in *No Longer at Ease* are the effects of the traditional African beliefs and Western ideals, education, and administration. Obi the only boy from Umuofia is trained in England and is equipped with western ideals. When he returns to the multicultural city of Lagos the internal conflicts trap him. The city he left behind before going to London is changed during his absence; it is changed with the time. The strange value system in Lagos astonishes him. As Obi returns from London with a degree in B. A. Honors, the Umuofia Progressive Union arranges a welcome party to celebrate his success. The Union expects that Obi is transformed by the western life style, and they have paid for education hence they expect his behavior as a university educated man. But Obi attends the reception, "in his shirt-sleeves" (Achebe, *NLE*, 35), and disappoints the members of the Union. The narrator says that this is his mistake number one. After the prayer, the secretary of the union presents welcome address. Achebe skillfully composes the speech of address to contrast the values Obi has brought from London and it is the beginning of the conflict between the Umuofia Progressive Union and Obi. The secretary speaks about the great honor Obi has brought to their village and community. He speaks expectation as,

The importance of having one of our sons in the vanguard of this march of progress is nothing short of axiomatic. Our people have a saying 'ours is ours, but mine is mine.' Every town and villages struggles at this momentous epoch in our political evolution to possess that of which it can say: 'This is mine'. We are happy that today we have such an invaluable possession in the person of our illustrious son and guest of honor" (Achebe, *NLE*, 36).

One can easily point out the kind of expectations from Obi by the union. They are happy that they have one of their men at higher position in government and it would help them for their political



and economical development. Because in Nigeria the government is *they* and nothing is in the hands of the natives and in such situations, one of their sons is appointed among *them*.

But very soon their dream is shattered because Obi's speech is unimpressive. He talks about the values of education, "Education for service and not for white-collar jobs and comfortable salaries" (Achebe, *NLE*, 37). The union expects an impressive speech from Obi in good English but Obi fails them. Obi quickly feels that the demands being made upon him are unacceptable. He is alien with a different set of values.

Achebe creates a series of incidents which are either strange or unacceptable to university educated Obi. He faces an interview in Public Service Commission in which he is asked a silly question by one of the committee members that whether he wants a job in civil services so that he can take bribes. Obi hesitates on the question. He has made theory before that interview that the Nigerian Public Service would remain corrupt, until the men from university join the department. Achebe not only represents the corrupt situations in government but also in public life too. And these situations disturb the idealized Obi and he is unable to cope with them. After his interview, Obi pays a short visit to Umuofia to meet his family. He travels in a mammy wagon. The wagon is suddenly stopped by two policemen to check the document of the vehicle. One policeman checks the documents and the other negotiates bribe at a distance with the driver's mate. As Obi gazes at them, the police man refuses the bribe, thinking that Obi might be a C. I. D. man, consequently the other finds some faults with the documents. The deal between them is failed because of Obi and now the policeman would charge more money to the driver. Hence, the driver expresses his anger over Obi, "Why you look the man for faces when we want give um him two shilling?" (Achebe, *NLE*, 50) he asked Obi. "Because he has no right to take two shilling from you," Obi answered (Achebe, *NLE*, 50). The driver realizes that Obi is an educated man, but Obi's foolish knowledge and idealism is not applicable in real life. He ridicules Obi, "Na him make I no de want carry you book people" (Achebe, *NLE*, 50). The driver asks Obi why he poked his nose in the matter without his concern and consequently the policeman will charge more money. Even all passengers also think that Obi has caused the trouble to the driver with heavy fine. Whereas Obi feels guilty, but he is surprised by the incident that people grant such illegal practices and do not mind and believe in laws. It is one of the incidents which make Obi uneasy with value system and the corruption. He thinks that the corrupt alien government rules Nigeria of which he wants to get rid but he realizes in his journey that there is much ignorance in the common public, and one has to fight with such internal faults first and then with the alien power. He expresses his disappointment,

What an Augean stable! he muttered to himself. Where does one begin? With the masses? Educate the masses?-Not a chance here. It would take centuries - But what kind of democracy can exist side by side with so much corruption and ignorance? Perhaps a half way house-a sort of compromise (Achebe, *NLE*, 50).

In this way, he shows his anger about the incident because he is able to see the corruption all over Nigeria.

While representing internal conflicts, Achebe presents the capital city Lagos as an amalgamation of two kinds of values. It has become hybrid city; where people from many countries and clans have been living their life differently. That is the place, where people with different world view meet and perhaps their views create problems among them. Obi, after a short visit to Umuofia, attends a meeting of Umuofia Progressive Union. The union has just passed a loan to its member. And one of the members creates a trouble by his opinion that it is their work that has brought themselves



four hundred miles to Lagos from Umuofia. In response to it the other member says, “It is money, not work - we left plenty of work at home” (Achebe, *NLE*, 91). Then the whole meeting agrees that it is money not work that has brought them in Lagos. Value of work in Umuofia and value of money in Lagos thus clash with each other. In this regard Arthur Ravaenscroft (as cited in Morrison, 2007) analyses the present situations,

Umuofian society still represents values of the past while the Nigerian capital, Lagos, is the cosmopolitan urban present, where everyone competes, no holds for the meager, perks of incipient affluence. Umuofia is rurally conservative, a hybrid amalgam of pagan and reestablished Christian representatives (Morrison, 70).

In the same meeting Obi requests the union to give four months to start repayment of his loan. Then the union approves this delay but the president of the union just wants to know what does Obi do with his big salary? And he has heard that Obi is moving around a girl of doubtful ancestry and wants to marry her. In reaction Obi stands up with great furry and warns the president that he will take his request back and will start paying from the month, “But don’t you dare interfere in my affairs again” (Achebe, *NLE*, 95) and he leaves the meeting. It indicates that Obi is changed and has forgotten his age old culture to respect elder and his own traditions. A marriage never has been a private affair in ancient Umuofia. It is the subject of happiness and celebration to all the clan members and is commonly decided. Emanuel Obiechina holds the view that,

Traditional life in pre-colonial Africa subsisted on the collective solidarity of people who shared common customs and beliefs and an identical world view are linked by blood or marriage ties and are, by the close-knit nature of their social relationships deeply involved in one another’s personal life (Emenyonu, 219).

Obi’s reaction to the president is strange to the union because the union has paid for his education in abroad and they just want to make him aware about life in Lagos and upcoming dangers in Obi’s life. With the above example and clash between Obi and the Union, Achebe wants to represent that the young generation which is educated at overseas or metro-cities, rejects the traditional moral teaching and become hostile to the old generation and this creates conflicts between Obi and the President. In reaction to Obi’s sudden departure from the meeting, the president ridicules his behaviour and another member remarks that “we paid eight hundred pounds to train him in England. But instead of being grateful he insults us because of a useless girl” (Achebe, *NLE*, 5). The union has many aspirations attached to Obi’s job in senior service. He can help his fellow clan’s men in a number of ways. The union feels proud because he is the only man from Umuofia in the service, this has uplifted their honor.

The capital city of Lagos is a centre for political activities and each group wants to defeat another in their social and political emancipation, in this case Obi is only a *palm fruit* who can prove to be a medium of progress of the union and consequently his clan. But Obi being a university educated has shaped his personality over western ideals and somehow stands opposite to the values of the union. Prof. E. N. Enenyonu puts his views on the conflicts between the union and Obi as, “The major conflicts in the novel centre on Obi’s standards and the gulf between Western acculturation and Nigerian urban realism” (Emenyonu, 107). Nigerian realism is beyond Obi’s comprehension. He behaves as he has learnt during his four years stay at London.



Achebe, as a literary artist, depicts the various conflicts in Igbo community. There are many internal as well as external clashes in the novels. The traditional African Igbo community is self-ruled and ruled by the basic principles of their religion, ancestors and the elders and titled men. While living a communal life, the people always try to find their existence as an individual and to establish their firm but different identity within the community. Achebe offers the clashes between traditions and modernism. The Igbo community is based on the principle of group solidarity, and any person or an individual who tries to step out this solidarity; he immediately gets into conflict with the whole society. It can be seen that Okonkwo commits suicide, Ezeulu becomes mad but they let not loosen the grip of their values. But Obi succumbed to the exploitative system of western civilization.

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