
Communal Solidarity and Kinship in *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe, the most claimed African writer has not written his novels for aesthetic pleasure rather as social responsibility towards his society. He speaks for his society and his audiences are the local Africans and the rest of the world. Achebe has taken a project to reaffirm the pre-colonial African life and represent the postcolonial chaos in the life of Igbo people through his writings. Therefore, he has written five novels comprising pre-colonial Nigeria to the twenty-five years of Nigerian independence. They are set in independent Nigeria and depict the consequences of colonialism and neo-colonialism in Nigeria.

The Europeans have always been of critical opinions about African people and culture. They always try to see African people as illiterate, naked, barbarous and African societies as tribes. The present research paper is an attempt to analyze Chinua Achebe's novel *No Longer at Ease* as a dramatization of the communal solidarity among Igbo people.

Keywords: communal solidarity, colonialism, humiliation, emancipation, Igbo community, etc.

Introduction:

Obi, the protagonist of the novel, spends four years in England and bags the B. A. (Hon.) degree. Achebe is of the opinion that someone who leaves his homeland for foreign land, misses motherland very much. This also happens with Obi for four years as he says, "it seemed more like a decade than four years-It was in England that Nigeria first becomes more than just a name to him. That was the first great thing that England did for him" (Achebe, 14). When Obi returns from London, he is given a big reception by Umuofia Progressive Union at the President's room at Lagos. The Secretary reads the welcome address. The union feels very proud of Obi because he will join the civil services and will occupy a European Post. Every town around Umuofia has its own sons in the services. The secretary further speaks of, "the great honor Obi had brought to the ancient town of Umuofia, which could now join the comity of other towns in their march towards political irredentism, social equality, and economic emancipation" (36). The members and officers of Umuofia

Progressive Union are happy, that's why the address is repeatedly interrupted by the cheers and the clapping. Obi having European education has various ideas about emancipation of Nigeria. The western education has enlightened him to work for his motherland. He returns with a commitment and is full of inspiration to work for Nigeria. Achebe makes the readers to feel that western modern education has given Obi power and a chance to be on European Post to serve his nation and bring progress to his community.

It is the real homecoming for Obi when he returns Umuofia after the reception in Lagos. This is his native place, which he has missed in England. His feeling to return to Umuofia,-was sometime so strong that he found himself feeling ashamed of studying English for his degree. He spoke Ibo whenever he had the least opportunity of doing so. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to find another Ibo-speaking student in a London Bus. (57)

It makes clear that Obi takes pride in his Igbo language and visits imaginatively to Umuofia. But he gets hurt, when he finds another Nigerian student speaks in English with him and it is humiliation for Obi to do so, "especially in the presence of the proud owner of that language" (57). He also takes pride in the great art of conversation in Igbo and thinks himself, "let them come and see men and women and children who knew how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed by those who claimed to teach other nations how to live" (57). Through this, he discards the notion that the English language and culture are more civilized in the world. Achebe, by means of above impressions of Obi, denies the fact, that though European colonizers are imposing their language and culture on the native African, in any way are unable to destroy totally the Igbo language and culture. Achebe also gives emphasis on the first generation, converted into Christianity and the young generation, taking education in colonizers' country and universities are not ready to abandon their ancestral language and culture to the European modernity.

Achebe gives a legend like welcome to Obi in his native place; it will be justifiable to quote the whole scene of Obi's welcome in Umuofia, Obi's welcome to his village was almost a festival-band of music-makers went out two miles on the Umuofia-Onitsha road to await Obi's arrival. There were at least five different groups, if one excludes the brass band of the C.M.S. School Umuofia. Those who were not waiting along the road, elderly people especially were already arriving in large number at Mr. Okonkwo's compound. (55)

The narrator describes of the reception. He conveys that there are hundreds of people and Obi gives about four hundred handshakes and more than hundred embraces. While showing this festival like welcome ceremony, Achebe does not miss to convey the Umuofians sent Obi to England to have White man's modern education but by showing the grand traditional welcome to Obi on his arrival, he emphasizes the importance of tradition. As the narrator says that the chairs are not sufficient to sit. Many people spread their goatskins and sit on the floor. Through this Achebe makes it clear that, "it did not make much

difference whether one sat on a chair or on the floor because even those who sat on chairs spread their goatskins on them first" (58). One can observe that there are still adherences to their culture. The oldest man in the gathering Ogbuefi Odogwu breaks the kola-nut and prays this kola-nut will bless them and every one replies Amen and they cheer. This is the picture of the traditional culture at Umuofia. Then Ogbuefi Odogwu compares Obi with his grandfather Ogbuefi Okonkwo and reminds the great time of Okonkwo, Ezeudu, Obierika, Okola, and Nwosu, "these men were great in their day. Today greatness has changed its tune, titles are no longer great, and neither are barns or large number of wives and children. Greatness is now in the things of the white man" (62). They think Western education is more important than titles. Here, Achebe contrasts the concept of a rich man by money to a prestigious man by titles. But now the titles are replaced by money caused by colonial interference.

Most of and major actions of the novel take place at Lagos, a city in Nigeria, to which Obi returns with energy of European education and wants to work for the emancipation of his society. On his return, Obi finds that the traditional values and culture are replaced, and material gains have become cultural artifacts in Lagos.

Achebe places his central character in a situation; he is bound to fail to the expectations of his kinsmen. When Obi joins his duty as a secretary in scholarship department, he faces many problems especially financial. Being in senior civil service, it is expected to live his life according to the status. Simultaneously, he has to hold his traditional values too. His European Post demands a lavish lifestyle with car, luxurious apartment etc. Obi is torn between his duty as a secretary, his duty towards his community, parents, and his marriage. Obi loves Clara, a nurse whom he has met in England. She is an *osu* means an outcast to Igbo religion. Thus he cannot marry an outcast. He fails to marry Clara. This modern Lagos creates many problems in Obi's life. It is impossible for Obi to escape from this prison house of colonial structure and the ideology of colonialism which determines the values by which the Nigerians have to live and are to be judged by the colonial law and court. He is unable to send money for his parents, to repay the scholarship and maintain his lifestyle. He is caught in a dilemma, consequently he begins to accept bribes to recommend an applicant's name for an interview before the examining board and he is caught red hand. The critic Ernest Emenyonu comments on the situation in the capital city of Lagos,

The politics and the city are marked by a pervasive and corrosive corruption which people condemn in the open, but strive secretly to excel each other in practicing. Bribery is part of the way of life because it holds the key to easy wealth and quick social and political prominence. (105)

But contrary to this Obi is full of idealism. He determines to get rid from these moral depravities. Thus, he argues with Christopher about purging the Nigerian civil services of

bribery and corruption. He charges. “The civil service is corrupt because of these so-called experienced men at the top” (Achebe, 22).

It is because of the colonizers have occupied the country since long time and the old modes of life have been replaced by new and have been adopted by the Umuofians. The society is not scattered because of degradation of old values which keep them united. Obi’s character has an impact of Christianity of his father, idealism of European education and the immoral and corrupt ideals of his present society in Lagos. He is torn between these two worlds of European values and his traditional values and cannot cling to either one of them. Prof. Killam remarks on Obi’s situation,

The core of the novel is the moral dilemma Obi finds in himself. The education that Obi received and his exposure and training had given him the moral awareness and of a modern educated young man, but lacks the courage to sustain and practice it. (50)

Achebe portrays the entire situation, which makes Obi to fall from high morals and ideal state of mind because he has been departed from his culture, values, traditions and community in England. Achebe presents Lagos as a multicultural city. But there are many Umuofians who still adhere to their values and follow them in the Afro-European Lagos and nourish the Igbo solidarity among its members. For this reason Achebe forms Umuofia Progressive Union to conserve the Igbo solidarity at Lagos.

The Umuofia Progressive Union tries to help their fellow kinsmen and scholars to pursue education abroad on their scholarship; from the funds they collect by taxing themselves harshly. As Obi returns from England, they feel delighted and look forward for Obi’s turn to help the Union and the community. The Union has its first meeting after arrival of Obi. They feel proud that one of their sons is attending the meeting and coming by a pleasure car. As Obi gets out of the car, they clap and cheer-
“Umuofia kwenu!” shouted one old man.

“Ya!” replied everyone in unison.

“Umuofia kwenu!”

“Ya!”

“kwenu!”

“Ya!”

“Ife awolu Ogoli azua n’afia,” he said. (Achebe, 90)

The meeting begins with Joshua Udo’s case. He was a messenger in the post office. The chief clerk caught him sleeping while on duty. But Joshua said that he was not sleeping but thinking, and he had failed to his promise to the chief clerk of giving ten pounds as a bribe when he was appointed. In response to Joshua’s confession the President reacts;

“You did not leave Umuofia four hundred miles away to come and sleep in Lagos. - There are enough beds in Umuofia. If you don’t want to work, you should return there. Anyway, I move that we approve a loan of ten pounds to Mr. Joshua Udo for the.....er.....er....the explicit purpose of seeking reengagement.” The loan was approved-The old man in the meeting continued, “Joshua is now without a job. We have given him ten pounds. But ten pounds does not talk. If you stand a hundred pounds here where I stand now, it will not talk, that is why we say that he who has people is richer than he who has money”. This was greeted with approval. (90)

Through the above proceedings of the meeting, Achebe creates a very good example of communal solidarity in Igbo community. Though they are scattered in Lagos, they meet frequently and ask for the help from brothers and think of everyone’s welfare. Through such meeting and helping each other, they create communal harmony and obey and believe the decisions taken with communal approval. The well known critic David Carroll admires this solidarity and puts, “their ethic is empirical and situational and it is based upon the solidarity and continuance of the tribe” (78). The importance of solidarity and communal life is also reflected in Obi’s vote of thanks in the same meeting. He says, Our fathers also have a saying about the danger of living apart. They say it is the curse of the snake. If all snake lived together in one place, who would approach them? But they live every one unto himself and so fall easy prey to man. (Achebe, 93)

The citation of the meeting is so important because Achebe contrasts these two sides of life in Lagos, one is affected by the foreign culture, seeking pleasure and maintaining status quo at the cost of traditional values, and other side is preserving the traditional life and inspiring the next generation for the same life and principles. Prof. Khaiminthang is also of the same opinion. According to him through the medium of such incidents, Achebe consistently holds the view that colonialism cannot uproot any culture completely (11). It may succeed in dismantling and disturbing it. Thus despite the disturbances in Umuofians life and solidarity they adhere to the concept of kinship and brotherhood and follow these principles even in the time of crises in the entire community. When Obi is caught taking bribes and put to the trial, his kinsmen come to help and rescue him. The president repeats that they will not feel anger in their bone, he must be saved. Moreover, their traditional solidarity enables them to arrange a lawyer for Obi, since,

They had no illusions about Obi. He was, without doubt, a very foolish and self-willed young man. But this was not the time to go into that. The fox must be chased away first; after that the hen might be warned against wandering into the bush. (Achebe, 06) Though Obi becomes an individual by his European education, the native Umuofia culture relies not on people like Obi’s strength but also on the help of the community. The Umuofia Progressive Union forgets the disrespect by Obi and comes to rescue him. Through this

incident Achebe shows his concept of unity. M. Victor Uchendu (as cited in Larson, 1978) also expresses his views on Igbo unity;

Igbo individualism is not ‘rugged’ individualism, it is individualism rooted in group solidarity. The Igbo realized that ‘a river does not ear a blind calabash.’ There is a great emphasis on communal cooperation and achievement. The ‘communal’ character of the Igbo must be traced to the formative influence of their nucleated residence, pattern, and the ideological urge ‘to get up.’ The idea of cooperation, illustrated in work groups, credit association, and title-making society, pervades all aspects of Igbo culture. (p. 41-2)

Suddenly Obi is called to Umuofia by his father because his mother is seriously ill. Obi pays a short visit to Umuofia and this visit takes the reader again in the Umuofia of the time of *Things Fall Apart*, the traditional Umuofia. The readers are again introduced to Umuofian culture by means of songs, tales, and proverbs. When Obi is in the room, some women return from a funeral playing music and want to meet Obi to salute him but Mr. Okonkwo stops them, Obi intervenes in and stops Okonkwo doing so. Obi’s mother also loves music, “even when it was heathen music” (Achebe, 146). The song is full of moral teaching and the African culture. The song is called, *The Song of Heart*.

A letter came to me the other day. I said to Mosisi: ‘read my letter for me.’

Mosisi said to me: “I do not know how to read.”

I went to Innocenti and asked him to read my letter.

Innocenti said to me: “I do not know how to read.”

I Asked Simonu to read for me. Simonu said:

“This is what the letter has asked me to tell you:

He that has a brother must hold him to his heart,

For a kinsman cannot be brought in the market,

Neither is a brother bought with money.”

Is everyone here?

(Hele ee he ee he)

Are you all here?

(Hele ee he ee he)

The letter said

That money cannot buy a kinsman,

(Hele ee he ee he)

That he who has brothers

Has more than riches can buy.

(Hele ee he ee he) (146-47)

Obi’s father hopes that he should constant in contacts with other Umuofians in the Lagos because, ‘in a strange land one should always move near one’s kinsmen,’ these expectations reflect the core meaning of *The Song of Heart*. In his visit, he admits to his

father, that he wants to marry, Clara. His father opposes to the match because Clara is an *osu*. But Obi insists that they are Christian and do not believe in such things. Whereupon his father replies;

“*Osu* is like leprosy in the minds of our people I beg of you, my son, not to bring the mark of shame and leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and your children’s children unto the third and forth generations will curse your memory-” (152)

Mr. Okonkwo being a Christian does not accept the *osu* as a free born and relates to Igbo value system in which an *osu* is like leprosy. David Carroll clarifies the behaviour of Mr. Okonkwo and the particular stance he takes, “Isaac Nwoye Okonkwo jettisons his hard-won Christian faith and his old age opposes his son’s marriage not on the grounds of moral or religious principles but from a deeper level of experience-a life-time of isolation and suffering” (83). Mr. Okonkwo suffered a lot when he left his father’s house for Christianity. He wants that Obi should not suffer himself and the generations to come. Obi’s mother also opposes to the marriage and now she realizes the meaning of her horrifying dream in which she was lying on her bed, and she found that a swam of white termites has eaten up her bed right under her. She threatens Obi he can marry Clara only on her death body. And if he does so while she is alive, she will kill herself. The whole scene shows that both his father and mother oppose his marriage with an *osu*, on the grounds of Igbo culture, it means people till now respect their past. His parents’ decision disturbs Obi a lot and despair falls on him. Obi’s condition can be concluded as he is no longer at ease in the old dispensation and values.

At the end of Obi’s career Clara leaves him forever, then his mother dies, there are many financial problems before him to come out of them, he leaves his morals, values and accepts bribes and is caught red hand and is arrested by the police. He cannot attend his mother’s funeral. His conduct is summed by the President of Umuofia Progressive Union as; “A man may go to England, become a lawyer or a doctor, but it does not change his blood. It is like the bird that flies off the earth and lands on an anthill. It is still on the ground.” (Achebe, 182)

It means that Obi’s fate is bound to his tradition, values and to community. It is in the conclusion on Obi’s career and his doom, one can say that Obi’s disloyalty to his tribal laws and values causes it because the values have their age long history and people also believe in them in Umuofia. On the other hand, he isolates himself from his traditions, kinsmen and values and the western education makes him individual which causes detachment from communal harmony.

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