

## Hybrid Cultural Identity In Chinua Achebe's No Longer At Ease

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### Abstract

*The collision of two distinct cultures during the colonial era gave rise to a significant outcome: the reshaping of individual and collective identities, resulting in a fusion of cultures among the colonized. According to Bhabha, this amalgamation of identities occurs within what he calls the "third space," a concept that illustrates how colonialism can profoundly influence and amalgamate identities. This article explores the development of a hybrid cultural identity in the character Obi Okonkwo, an educated male, as depicted in Chinua Achebe's novel, No Longer at Ease. Through Obi's experiences and the backdrop of British colonial power, Achebe delves into the complexities of identity formation among Nigerians. Obi's life and sense of self are profoundly influenced by the impact of colonialism, and No Longer at Ease vividly captures the intricate and multifaceted aspects of Nigerian culture.*

**Keywords:** Culture, identity, hybridity, ambivalence, darkness.

### Introduction

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) stands as a prominent figure, encompassing roles as a writer and critic who played a pivotal role in the domain of post-colonialism. The backdrop of colonization of Nigeria by the British through Achebe's formative years, along with the intricate interplay between the indigenous Ibo culture and the contemporary European culture, significantly moulded and informed Achebe's literary works. This dynamic interplay serves as a central theme in Achebe's No Longer at Ease where the protagonist grapples with the dual identity of preserving tradition while embracing the new.

No Longer at Ease unfolds its narrative against the backdrop of the 1950s, a crucial period of nascent independence of in Nigeria. The story commences with a legal trial involving the central character, Obi, who returns to Nigeria following a four-year stint in England for his university education. Obi's central struggle lies in harmonizing his deeply ingrained indigenous values with the more modern and Western-oriented mind-set he has acquired during his time abroad. This internal conflict leaves him feeling dislocated and estranged within the complex cultural tapestry of his homeland (Achebe et. Al. 2010).

If Ogbuefi Okonkwo, the protagonist in Things Fall Apart is viewed as hero, then Obi Okonkwo assumes the role of the antihero in No Longer at Ease. Within the Igbo society, a profound disintegration has transpired, primarily instigated by the pervasive influence of European colonialism in Africa. Obi is fundamentally a man of intellect and literature, a spin-off of missionary education with European influence. While he is imbued with Western individualism and pragmatism, vestiges of his ancestral heritage persist within him. Ogbuefi, Obi's grandfather, and a stark contrast to him, was a man of decisive

action, occasionally resorting to violence (Achebe 2). Obi, conversely, lacks the disposition for action and ultimately succumbs to his inaction, which serves as the catalyst for his downfall. Within Igbo society, Obi comes across as a somewhat unfamiliar figure due to his constant association with books. Indeed, his outlook on the world and his endeavour to decipher his own life experiences, which Achebe refers to as "exegesis," are heavily influenced by idealistic notions.

### **The Struggle for Authenticity**

In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe vividly portrays the colonial interaction between the native communities of Nigeria, giving rise to a hybrid cultural identity that remains constantly unstable. This identity continually vacillates between the two contrasting cultural realms, perpetually engendering a sense of unease and instability, which can be aptly described as a state of perpetual "no longer at ease". A "third space of enunciation" for the subject, according to Bhabha, is where they find themselves at the intersection of diverse and mobile cultural trajectories (Bhabha 37).

The book's title is taken from T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi," a poem that expresses a strong sense of alienation. According to Fanon, the colonial-era Western imperial education developed a pervasive "inferiority complex" in the native population, which caused them to reject their original cultural heritage in favour of embracing Western principles. Christianity and the associated missionary education served as instruments of exploitation and cultural detachment wielded by the colonizers.

The initial cohort of converts, befuddled by the allure of the colonial value structure, zealously embraced colonial philosophy and uncritically imitated the white colonists. Obi's father, Issac Okonkwo exemplifies this phenomenon, and numerous examples in the text depict his submissive emulation of white values. In confirmation with Christianity, Issac rejects the practice of polygamy prevalent in Nigerian society and openly contests people when they suggest that Obi embodies the spirit of the great Ogbuefi Okonkwo. He even critiques those who believe in the village's chief rainmaker. In his pursuit of Christianity, Issac severs ties with his father, abandons his traditional customs, and disassociates himself from his fellow non-Christian Ibos, deeming them heathens. He goes so far as to prohibit his wife and children from partaking in meals at the homes of non-Christian neighbours. When offered a piece of yam by a neighbour, Obi declines, stating, "We don't consume food prepared by heathens" (Achebe 45). He tells his wife Hannah not to teach their children any myths or traditions from Nigeria since he views them as pagan practices. Following the demise of her husband, Hannah finally joins the church with her children in her capacity as a loving wife. The bed underneath her is eaten by white termites in her subconscious, symbolizing her repressed African ideas of fertility and continuity that were put in jeopardy by white supremacy. (Achebe 102).

### **The Collision of Cultures**

For the next generation of converts, there exists a subtle nuance within the heart of darkness, marked by a degree of ambivalence in it. Obi, belonging to the second generation, has been steeped in the literary modernism of the European canon from an early age. His formative years are intimately intertwined with the realm of books and literature. Consequently, these European values serve as the seed for his cultural transformation, alienation, and ultimately, the rejection of his parents' traditional world, albeit in a complex and ambivalent manner.

In essence, Obi's identity emerges as a fusion of both African and European influences, making him a representative of a hybrid identity. Achebe deftly captures this reality at various junctures in the novel. For instance, Obi's earnest desire to reconnect with his African roots becomes entangled with his subconscious inclination to admire English culture and lifestyle. Furthermore, his affection for Nigerian folktales, which symbolize

Nigeria's authentic cultural identity, clashes with his father's Christian teachings and the tenets of European faith. Folktales also lay the foundation for his decision to pursue English literature as his field of study. Achebe aims to illustrate that an unadulterated national identity is fundamentally flawed, as cultural identity in the postcolonial context invariably assumes a hybrid nature.

In Bhabha's perspective, the process of colonialism brings about a transformation in the cultures of both the colonizers and the colonized to such an extent that neither side remains truly "independent" of the other (116). The consequence of this dynamic is there is no "unified self" "whether claimed by colonialists or nationalists in this situation" "the symmetry and duality of Self/Other, inside/outside" are broken (ibid). In this scenario, the established notions of "Self" and "Other," or what lies within and outside, lose their symmetry and duality (ibid). This undermines the practicality of nationalist aspirations to reclaim a pre-colonial, untainted purity, as the culture of colonial nations inherently embodies a hybrid nature, born from the interplay between European cultural systems and indigenous traditions. Consequently, many postcolonial writers argue that hybridity serves as a positive force in the creation of new and enriched cultural identities.

In his work *The Location of Culture*, Bhabha delves into the intricate exploration of cultural identity and how it forms for both the colonizer and the colonized. He introduces concepts such as 'mimicry,' 'hybridity,' and 'third space' to illuminate the interplay between colonizers and colonized, illustrating how cultures perpetually engage with one another. This cultural exchange and interaction result in phenomena like 'cultural 'hybridity,' and 'ambivalence.'

The relevance of the contact between the colonizer and the colonized is highlighted by Bhabha's definition of "hybridity," which emphasizes their interdependence and the mutual moulding of their subjectivities (Ashcroft et al. 1998: 118). According to Bhabha, all cultural expressions and structures develop in a special area that he refers to as the "third space of enunciation." This area may open the door to the notion of a global culture built on the expression and writing of cultural hybridity (qtd. in Ashcroft 124). As a result, according to Bhabha, the intersection of the cultures of the colonizers and the colonized creates a "third space" where hybrid identities are born.

Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* vividly explores the multitude of identity challenges that arise as an inevitable consequence of colonialism, aligning with Bhabha's insights. The protagonist, Obi, serves as a prime example of how African and European cultures have jointly shaped his identity, exemplifying the quintessential hybrid identity. Achebe artfully plays with words, drawing attention to the anagrammatic relationship between "Obi" and "Ibo." While Obi belongs to the Ibo tribe and speaks the Ibo language, the very essence of his name reflects a profound alteration from his pre-colonial self. In essence, Obi remains an Ibo, albeit one who has undergone a radical transformation from his original state. The narrative abounds with compelling evidence to support the assertion that Obi embodies a hybrid self (Lomba, Ania. 2015).

On his return from England, Obi comes to the realization that Nigeria no longer corresponds to the Nigeria of his fond memories and the nostalgic verses he once penned. It dawns on him that the reality on the ground is in many ways diverse from the image he had cherished throughout his stay in England (Achebe 13). He perceives Lagos as Lagos a "strange city." Nigeria bears no resemblance to Obi's romanticized and idealized vision of it as an African nation. Achebe, through Obi's perspective, endeavours to illustrate the profound extent to which colonialism has fundamentally altered both the external appearance and the intrinsic essence of Africa. Remarkably, the colonized African populace often remains oblivious to these transformations, unable to fully perceive their magnitude.

Obi is serenaded by the tribal folk music of the traders on their wagon as he returns to Umuofia for his graduation ceremony. Even though he had heard these songs many times

before leaving for England, he now saw them in a brand-new way. He mentally translates the songs as he listens, and all of a sudden he understands their meaning for the first time. Even in what may be regarded as a weak tune, he is astounded by the wealth of associations (Achebe 36). This incident demonstrates how Obi, a postcolonial person, depends on conquerors' languages to comprehend himself, his identity, and his culture more fully. Even though the song is a fusion of English and Nigerian languages, it becomes accessible and meaningful to someone possessing a hybrid identity.

The hybrid essence of the postcolonial self isn't limited to Obi alone; it extends to other educated and privileged individuals in Nigeria. A prime illustration of this can be seen in the members of the UPU, who take pride and derive enjoyment from conversing in eloquent and proper English. It's worth noting that their rendition of English significantly diverges from the English that Obi encountered in England, highlighting the nuanced, hybridized nature of their linguistic expression. This blending of English and Nigerian culture is also visible in many areas of Umuofia and other regions of Nigeria, as is clear from the text. When the town hosts a feast to mark Obi's return, they offer the kola nut—a traditional Nigerian tribal dish—but they do so in a Christian manner, honouring both cultures. In a poetic genre which belongs to English Literature, Obi communicates his thoughts of longing for Nigeria, and he locates these poems in A E Houseman's collection of poetry called "Nigeria" (Achebe 78).

However, this process of cultural transformation and hybridity did not universally bring happiness to the non-elite indigenous population. The intellectuals, who placed themselves in roles once held by colonial masters, often mirrored the oppressive, exclusive and exploitative propensities of their predecessors. Consequently, the power struggle that initially existed between the colonial masters and native subjects persisted even after political independence, albeit in a different form. This transition marked the emergence of a power struggle within the postcolonial nation-state, pitting the elites against the rest of the population (Chinweizu, 1987).

The development of national awareness and anti-colonial resistance as the aftereffects of independence can be delineated into three stages: First, native intellectuals, influenced by colonial culture, strove to emulate and assimilate it, often by forsaking their own culture in an attempt to conform to Western norms, as exemplified by Obi's father in the novel. Second, these intellectuals came to realize that no matter how hard they tried, they could not fully adopt Western ways to the extent that they would be treated equally by the colonial masters. Consequently, they embarked on a journey to reconnect with their own culture and romanticize their precolonial past. Once they aligned with their people and actively resisted colonial dominance, they finally developed into truly anti-colonial characters. Fanon emphasizes that the oppressed class's welfare is not guaranteed by going back to the pre-colonial era. He claims that "the national bourgeoisie steps into the shoes of the former European settlement" in *Wretched of the Earth* (152). (Okpewho, I, 1992, Bernasconi, R. (2010).

Obi, initially criticizes the corruption of the elderly Nigerian leaders, advocating for the replacement of these older individuals with younger, university-educated men in order to combat corruption within the Nigerian public service (Achebe 31). However, ironically, Obi ultimately succumbs to corruption himself, accepting a substantial bribe that lands him in legal trouble. This development is undoubtedly influenced by his education, but it leaves European community perplexed, as they cannot fathom "how a young man of [his] education and brilliant promise could have done this" (Achebe 4).

### **Negotiating Cultural Hybridity**

Obi adopts the persona of a black Kurtz, evoking the character of Kurtz from Joseph Conrad's "Heart of Darkness," who is a hollow individual torn between his ideals and the brutal reality, with language serving as the line between the two. Obi's predicament

represents complete integration of white values and goes beyond simply losing touch with his family, culture, and native tongue. His decision to skip his mother's funeral is the clearest example of this shift. He questioned if he was correct and decided it would be more beneficial to send as much money as he could for the funeral than to utilize it to return home (Achebe 122).

In *No Longer at Ease* numerous instances underscore the fluidity and instability of identity. An examination of characters like Obi reveals an ongoing cultural interplay between colonizers and colonized, rendering a return to pure pre-colonial selves impossible for both parties. Obi, in particular, grapples with profound unease within himself, in Nigeria, and regarding his own identity (Ashcroft, B et al. 1998).

While Achebe embraces Bhabha's concept of hybridity and cultural amalgamation, he also endeavours to rekindle the essence of authentic African culture. Consequently, *No Longer at Ease* aligns with Frantz Fanon's advocacy for the revival of cultural independence. Fanon maintains that Africans should celebrate their culture and resurrect their heroes as a means of constructing their identity. Achebe effectively illustrates Fanon's theory through the efforts of the black characters in the novel. In doing so, the book provides readers with a nuanced portrayal of the richness and intricacies of Nigerian culture.

### **Conclusion**

Chinua Achebe's "*No Longer at Ease*" offers a profound meditation on the complexities of hybrid cultural identity in post-colonial Nigeria. Through the character of Obi Okonkwo, Achebe navigates the terrain of cultural collision, authenticity, and negotiation, illuminating the multifaceted nature of identity formation. As Nigeria continues to grapple with the legacy of colonialism and the forces of globalization, Achebe's work remains as relevant and insightful as ever, challenging readers to confront the intricacies of cultural hybridity in an increasingly interconnected world.

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