

**CULTURAL “SYNCRETICITY”: A POSTCOLONIAL ANALYSIS OF
CHINUA ACHEBE’S NO LONGER AT EASE**

Dr. Tariq Khan

Assistant Professor, Department of English

University of Malakand

Corresponding E-Mail: tariqkhan1975@gmail.com

Mr. Aziz Ahmad

Assistant Professor, Department of English

University of Malakand

E-mail: azizuom@yahoo.com

&

Mr. Naseer Ahmad

M.Phil. Scholar, Department of English

International Islamic University, Islamabad

E-mail: naseerqazi7@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The present position paper explores cultural “syncreticity” (or cultural hybridity) in Chinua Achebe’s “No Longer At Ease” (1960). The researchers, in the Anglo-Nigerian socio-cultural milieu, probes the fused personality traits of the protagonist (Obi Okonkwo) in the narrative. Obi oscillates between the overwhelming English colonialism and the Nigerian colonised culture, resulting in a hybrid identity, and consequently, passing through the interstitial socio-cultural events and experiences. He endeavours hard to assimilate the twin identities—the overbearing colonial character and the subdued colonised individuality—during which he undergoes an arduous state and status of “in-betweenness”. The allegiance he owes to the colonial masters, and the cultural adaptation in the Nigerian society leaves his character asunder, thus causing an ambivalent condition of alienated identity and cultural crisis. The current study invokes Bhabha’s theory of cultural hybridity, converging on his seminal work, “The Location of Culture” (1994), for analysing the culturally fused Obi and the circumstances coming into view thereafter. Cultural hybridity, in the existing context, comes under the broad rubric of postcolonial theory and practise. Methodologically, the narrative is probed into and unravelled through the interpretation of the momentous events, influencing the character traits of the protagonist, and their subsequent impact on the Ibo (the protagonist’s native tribe).

Keywords: Identity crisis, Cultural hybridity, Coloniser, Colonised, Syncreticity

INTRODUCTION

Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) is a Nigerian author of the *No Longer At Ease* (1960). The novel has been released in the same year of Nigerian independence from England. Literary critics are of the view that although Achebe has produced most of the novels in English language, but there are indigenous words which have not been appropriated into the English language as stated by Ashcroft “Ultimately, the choice of leaving words untranslated in postcolonial texts is a political act” (cited by Olsson, 2010, p. 5). He, in his novels, has also fused the Ibo’s language with English. The lifelong Ibo culture has been replaced by the exotic tradition transported by the British missionaries. Some people have accepted the new culture; however, others have resisted it by opting for Okonkwo.

Similarly, highlighting the presence of cultural hybridity in the novel, Achebe comments on how the outlandish ethos affects the cultural tenets of Ibo’s. The protagonist of the novel, Obi Okonkwo, who got educated in England, wants to preserve his native Ibo culture, unconsciously; however, he promotes British culture too. Also, he relies upon the English language to discern his own culture. He frequently listens to the folk songs of Ibo during his stint in England, but he reaches to its better understanding when he translates them into English. Likewise, he is up against the elderly Nigerians, thinking that they are corrupt to the core; nonetheless, the newly educated youngsters would replace them.

The current study analyses the identity crisis of the leading character (Obi) in Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer At Ease* (1960). Obi, a Western-educated young man, aspires for and strives to introduce English language and culture in Nigerian society, thinking that doing so will transform the societal fabric and will eventually root out corruption from the country. For that to happen, he postulates replacing the dated system and its henchmen by the young educated generation, who are well-acquainted with the western values and mores. While executing his crystalised plan, he oscillates between the schismatic identity of the West and East—the English and the Nigerian. Harkening back to Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) and Jean Rhys’ *Wide Sargasso Sea* (1966), he rarely adjusts to his native society because of the inhibiting reservations and sharp criticism by the established socio-

cultural norms of the locals. Thus, he has left one society for another, wherein he is neither entirely accepted nor acknowledged.

Also, *No Longer at Ease* underlines a split-up individual, geographically and ideologically, who is neither of there nor here. While living in the indigenous community, he vacillates between the northern (western-cum-modern) and southern (developing-cum-traditional) hemispheres of the world to maintain his identity intact. Similarly, he is the representative of the western-educated youth in Nigeria who proposes that only the educated youth can replace the trite and traditional Africa for a prosperous one. Obi, at times, disregards the older generation of Africa (in general) and Nigeria (in particular), for their stale and fraudulent practises in public services and urges the young university graduates to rise for their rights. That would, in turn, transform the destiny of Nigeria. Though he faces challenging ordeals to bring about corrective reforms in the said society, yet his efforts amid the divided identity are worthwhile. The justice system and the corrupt-free society (as intended by Obi in his native town Ibo) that represents Nigeria in miniature are well-reflected at the beginning and the end by introducing the court scene.

The present study invokes the postcolonial theory featuring cultural hybridity with particular focus on Bhabha's *The Location of Culture* (1994), which takes into equal account the cultures of the coloniser and the colonised. While coalescing the twin cultures in the "liminal" space, Bhabha grants equal opportunity to both for representing themselves. Following Bhabha's conceptual framework, in a multicultural society, a third culture emerges as a result that combines the elemental characteristics of contributing cultures. The resultant "in-betweenness" (more precisely, the cultural hybridity) loses the purity of subsidising cultures.

The present research study proceeds in a qualitative approach. The researchers apply Bhabha's hybridity as a theoretical framework for the study. Furthermore, the text is critically analysed through close reading technique.

RESEARCH QUESTION

How was the character of Obi and the culture of Ibo affected by the presence of colonisers?

THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The term “Postcolonialism” is defined by different writers in different ways. Loomba (2002) considers postcolonialism as the process of a pullout from the rule of colonisers. The concept has been defined both in terms of conceptual and chronological sense. Postcolonialism is the disintegration of cultural, political, economic and social control and domination of the colonisers. According to Ashcraft, Griffith and Tiffen (2009) postcolonialism “deals with the effects of colonization on cultures and societies” (p. 166). The proponents take the concept in chronological sense and believe that it occurred as a result of post-independence. However, after the 1970s, the term ‘postcolonialism’ acquires literary value. Currently, it has an extensive understanding of the field of literature. It includes:

the study and analysis of European territorial conquests, the various institutions of European colonialisms, the discursive operations of empire, the subtleties of subject construction in colonial discourse and the resistance of those subjects, and, most importantly perhaps, the differing responses to such incursions and their contemporary colonial legacies in both pre-and post-independence nations and communities. (p. 169)

Postcolonialism deals with the problems, issues, resistance, and promises of decolonisation. It is the literature of non-western countries of the Carribean, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, the Pacific, and Latin America. The attitude of writers may vary towards postcolonialism, but there are several common themes based on which literature may be called postcolonial literature. These themes include: feminism, imperialism, identity issues, diaspora, migration, resistance, mimicry, language issues, culture clash, and many other such issues.

Hybridity is one of the many consequences of colonialism. Hybridity is a compelling phenomenon in post-colonial studies. In the process of colonisation, neither the coloniser nor the colonised culture can purely exist in the pre-colonial state; there must be the mixing of these two cultures. Bhabha (1994) argues that while maintaining the same line of argument “in-between or interstitial space that gives birth to new signs of identity through the negotiation of differences” (p. 1-2). When two cultures come in contact, it spheres a place for a new identity. This new place or new identity is neither the part of the colonised nor the coloniser’s culture; Bhabha labels it as hybrid identity. The best example of such an identity

would be the Anglo Indians in the sub-continent. They partially followed their Indian culture, and partially the British culture. They lived in between these two cultures. In other words, a new cultural identity comes into existence, which does not shed the old cultural traits but adopts the new cultural elements, thus results in a new synthetic identity.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The present research study employs a qualitative research approach. The qualitative study aims to fulfil the knowledge gap left over by the previous studies. The researchers have applied the close reading strategy to critically analyse the text and relate it with Bhabha's concept of cultural syncreticity. Close reading is a thoughtful and disciplined reading of a text or subject. In close reading, a specific passage is selected and is analysed in detail with keenness (Saccomano, 2014).

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Obi, in the novel, embodies Bhabha's theory of cultural hybridity, which underpins the mixing of cultures for creating "the third space of enunciation". In such a situation, the fusion produced holds features of both cultures and is characteristically hybrid. Obi is determined to adhere to his cultural roots and moorings, but at the same time, he is adamant about leaving the attachment with English mores that he has acquired over time. His strong propensity towards English language, culture, lifestyle, and behavioural pattern impels him to introduce the same in his indigenous system and society. While on the other hand, he is equally inclined towards and has an ardent love for his tribal traditions and societal norms. Therefore, Obi turns out to be socially syncretic and culturally blended, that speaks of and overtly displays his "interstitial" status and synthesised identity in the narrative. His love for Nigeria (the East) and nostalgia for England (the West) are in recurring conflict with each other, resulting in a hybrid character of Obi.

Obi loves his country and makes a conscious effort to fight for the rights of the Nigerian people against the British. Obi believes that the new generation of educated Nigerians will take out the corruption from its roots. However, after his return from England, he has been completely shocked when he sees the police bribe-taking. He firmly believes in fighting against corruption in Nigeria, but he has failed to achieve his goal since the cultural values of

Ibo's culture send him to the bottom of corruption. He has been forced to do precisely what he wants to fight against. Separation from his people and society comes in front of missing his goal. Hence, he comes in front of his people and culture. Old values can hardly last for a long time, and new values circulate during colonisation since it features moments of chaos and confusion.

The tussle starts between the old Ibo tradition and the new Western tradition. Achebe depicts this trauma in certain places in the novel under study. For example, young Obi's love of Nigerian folktale is against his father's Christian beliefs. Nigerian folktales are symbolic of Nigeria's true cultural identity, and Obi's love of these folktales is a fight against his father's Christian and European faith. His father (Isaac Okonkwo) considers Nigerian folktales heathen rites, and he orders his wife, Hannah, not to teach them to their children.

Obi is a young Nigerian who has studied in England and is influenced by the English Language and culture. His choice of subject selection gets changed with time. Firstly, he goes to England to study law, but he changes his decision, and he starts studying English Literature. The British culture and their lifestyle influence him, and thus the English shape his personality. He is dependent on the English language as when Obi returns to Umuofia to attend his graduation ceremony, and he hears the songs of the traders on the wagon, that he has heard many times in his life before his departure for England. As a graduate of English literature, Obi translates these songs into English in his mind. Immediately, he realises that the English translation of these songs help him to understand them for the first time. Achebe uses this occasion to confirm that Obi, as a man in the postcolonial era, requires the language of the coloniser to understand himself, his identity as well as his culture, even though the songs are the mixture of English and Nigerian language, and understanding of it for such a person with a hybrid identity poses no difficulty.

The novel is cycled; it ends from where it begins. Obi stands in a courtroom with a Western legal system. The novel starts from the question of the judge thus: "I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this" (p. 2) and ends without an answer. The experienced and well-educated judge cannot comprehend how an educated young man can commit such things. The British councilman, even the men of Umuofia, do not know. Besides, it is presumed that despite his certitude, William Green (his boss) does not know either (p. 170). All of them have been surprised that how a young,

educated man can take bribery as he has been against it. In the post-colonial era, a person is no longer at ease while going away from himself, his home country and his cultural identity. Achebe portrays this fact with a symbolic play on the words “Obi” and “Ibo”, which are anagrams. Obi is a man from the Ibo tribe, and his mother tongue is Ibo. However, as his name depicts, he has been an altered form of his real and pre-colonial self. In other words, Obi is an Ibo, but not without a radical transformation of the original.

In Obi's view, old Africans are corrupt, and they are responsible for corruption in Nigerian. One of the social issues in Nigeria is bribery, and Obi's above-said statement comes from the practice of bribery in the Nigerian political structure. Bribery, for older natives, is an instrument to obtain their social-political rights. On Obi's coming back to Nigeria, a welcome party has been thrown, the vice president of Ibo offers a bribe for Obi's job, stating that “I would have suggested *seeing* some of the men beforehand” (p. 33).

Obi argues that corruption refers to the lack of education among the old generation, and “to uneducated bribe is natural” in Ibo culture (p. 21). In Ibo's culture, bribery is usual to practise, but in England, it is taken as a severe crime, and they associate bribery with the scarcity of education and civil rights. Similarly, Obi is also against it.

Having spent four years in England and learning English literature alters Obi's perceptive understanding of the worldview. He even gives up the age long faith of his parents and the members of UPU. Achebe has deftly depicted that traditional values may be transformed, but cannot be thoroughly deracinated. Although Obi disrespects his clan, and thereby the clansmen continue to support him with his issue:

We paid eight hundred pounds to train him in England,' said one of them. “But instead of being grateful he insults us because of a useless girl, the President pointed out, a kinsman in trouble had to be saved, not blamed, anger against a brother was felt in the flesh, not in the bone. And, so the Union decided to pay for the services of a lawyer from their funds. (p. 5)

CONCLUSION

Colonialism results in a number of colonial traits, such as mimicry, ambivalence, homeliness, identity issues, and hybridity. Bhabha dilates upon hybridity as a direct effect on the native's culture, religion and language. Achebe marks hybridity as a direct effect of colonisation on the native's culture. Achebe extrapolates cultural osmosis in Obi as well as the other leading characters of the narrative. He expounds that when two cultures interact with each other; both the cultures mingle up and mostly lose their idiosyncrasies. No culture remains intact and pure as of their pre-colonial state after the process of colonisation. Similarly, Achebe explains the consequences of the colonisation when the British and Nigerian cultures came across each other. For that, Achebe remarks that Obi ahead of leaving for England has been a staunch follower of his native culture and religion, but after studying in England, his perception got changed. He is unable to preserve his indigenous culture in its pure and pristine form, but unconsciously, he is advocating British culture, as their lifestyle strongly influences him. Moreover, Obi's perception of religion and culture also changes. The English language, culture, lifestyle and behavioural pattern conspicuously influence him. Also, he turns against his cultural values, norms and practices. He desires to marry Clara Okeke because she is an outsider, and does not hail from Ibo tribe. In his tribal cultural setup, exogamy is not deemed as befitting, but Obi yearns to marry Clara despite all socio-cultural constraints. He holds less value for his indigenous mores and cultural practices

REFERENCES

- Achebe, C. (1963). *No longer At Ease*. Cambridge [eng.: Proquest LLC].
- Ashcroft, B., Griffiths, G., & Tiffin, H. (2009). *Post-colonial studies: The key concepts*. London: Routledge.
- Bhabha, H. K. (1994). *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge.
- Gul, H. Noor, R & Kaur, H. (2011). Hybridity in Bapsi Sidhwa's *An American Brat*. *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*, 22(1), 141–152.
- Loomba, A. (2002). *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. London: Routledge.
- Olsson, M. (2010). *Colonial Legacies, Ambivalence, Mimicry and Hybridity in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart and Louise Erdrich's Tracks*. Mid Sweden University.
- Ondaatje, M. (2015). *Postcolonial Cultural Hybridity in The English Patient* (Unpublished Master's Thesis). School of Language, Translation and Literary Studies, University of Tampere.
- Saccomano, D. (2014). How Close is Close Reading? *Texas Journal of Literacy Education*, 2(2), 140-147.