

***Re/inventing Africa:  
Chinua Achebe, No Longer at Ease, and the Question of Representing  
Cultural Others***

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**Abstract**

The Western novel, practicing imperialist Africanism, has historically *othered* Africans as savages. Chinua Achebe, a Nigerian writer, appropriated the colonizing West's language and narrative to present the colonial encounter from an African perspective. Interestingly enough, both African and non-African scholars believe that Achebe's novels inadvertently reproduced the essentialism that reduced Africa into a single complete discourse—a total invention of African literary culture. By analyzing one of Achebe's most important novels, *No Longer at Ease*, this study argues that Achebe's work presents a nuanced picture of both European and Nigerians as cultural others through the protagonist's lived experience in Lagos after returning from London.

**Introduction**

Chinua Achebe's body of work has been credited as the emergence of an African fiction that goes beyond the Eurocentric discourses about African cultures. Achebe's literature, starting from *Things Fall Apart*, has been essentialized as the beginning of authentic African literature—the colony speaking back to a Metropolis, which has often indiscriminately caricatured it as a cultural Other. This study explores the representations of cultural Others in Achebe's second novel *No Longer at Ease*. Although a work of fiction, this text performs the cultural work of informing on its society: in this case, colonial Nigeria of the twentieth century. My research is driven by a central question: why does the protagonist Obi Okonkwo—a Nigerian finally *given* opportunity and access to a government position, since imperial policy usually forbids such mobility for the colonized, ultimately abuse his power and succumb to corruption, despite his lofty Western ingrained idealism? Is it as Okonkwo's European employer, Mr. Green, claims, that, "The African is corrupt through and through" (3). By placing this narrative in a post-colonial framework, this study will move to disapprove that Orientalist, or European Africanist, claim and uncover the novel's true argument. There are certain explicit and implicit reasons and structures of power set firmly in place in the colonial setting designed to hinder Okonkwo's—and by the extension the African's—agency in colonial space. For its part, the novel registers the clash of ideologies between the indigenous culture and the imperial culture; and to Achebe's credit, the novel depicts from an African perspective the internal struggle of the indigenous

culture and identity to survive under the imposing and usurping weight of colonial modernization and education.

### Chinua Achebe and the European Imperialism

Europe's imperialistic intervention in Africa is an interesting study in human adaptation. This tragic event had the effect of permanently reshaping the face of the African continent in terms of religion, ideology, economy, politics, and society. In a sense, it has actively brought onto this Earth a new race of African peoples. The colonial encounter, and its experience by black Africans up until independence from European powers, is nothing short of an internal struggle for cultural identity and national recognition as a resistance to European domination. Along with the destruction of the previous regionalism and tribalism of pre-colonial Africa, Colonialism introduced new unified and centralized—albeit under imperial authority—nations. Indigenous peoples who were once separated by language, culture, and politics found themselves, by virtue of their proximity towards each other, carved into “nations” under a mutual distant and foreign ruler. The establishment of the colonial nation forced small autonomous groups and villages to break away from their communities and migrate into colonial cities in search of work and/or political voice in a world that is being directed by intruding Europeans. And within this encounter between village and city, the indigenous people are caught up in the clash between the ideologies of the old culture and the new imposed and accepted European doctrines.

Within the pages of *Orientalism*, Edward W. Said posits the theory of the Other to examine the complex mechanism and ideology behind imperialism—more specifically, the conversation between the West and the non-West during and after Europe's aggressive campaign for world dominance. Although he is not the first theoretician to utilize this theory, Said aptly applies it to the colonized world.<sup>1</sup> Imperialism, in its barest form, is a system of power encompassing the political, social, and cultural relationships between two forces: colonizer and colonized. Within this system these two forces occupy uneven spaces, imperialism's value system places—to use common post-colonial terminology—the dominant culture, the colonizing imperialist, in the center and the colonized in the periphery.<sup>2</sup> Said observes that imperialism understands the non-Western world as only a series of static discourses of its making, collected through a tradition of literature, travelogues, poetry, and various encounters in conquest. Through the practice of Orientalism, the study of the Orient the West has justified its imperialism as an ideological imperative to raise the lesser races that depend on it for direction and purpose, ‘In a quite constant way, Orientalism depends for its strategy on the flexible positional superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the upper relative hand.’<sup>3</sup> The non-West exists only in as much as it affects the West; it is silent, inactive, and passively depends on the center for its culture and

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<sup>1</sup> The concept of the Other originated out of German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Frederick Hegel's discussion of the Master-Slave dialect in his *Phenomenology of Spirit*.

<sup>2</sup> Ashcroft, Bill, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin. *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. London and New York: Routledge, 2002. This structure facilitates a clear division between the colonizing Metropolis as the subject and its territories as the objectified Other. Imperialistic discourse constructs the West, the Metropolis, as the center of any and everything, science, politics, literature, etc, concerned with the advancement of humanity.

<sup>3</sup> In his work *Orientalism*, p. 3. Edward W. Said specifically discusses the West's relationship with the Orient. Our argument observes that the West has also historically observed the same relationship with Africa—practicing an Africanism.

administration. This perspective indicates imperialism's modus operandi of indirect rule. Orientalism expresses the European tradition—literary or otherwise—of understanding itself through its Oriental or African Other.

The West, of course, has a rich literary tradition that extols European culture. The English department and the imposed teaching of English in non-Western educational institutions signify Western culture's ethnocentrism. Every Western and non-Western student of English and literature witnesses the great Western classics in their education; in that encounter, he meets the West's constructed cultural Other. English literature, especially the English novel, is intimately and uniquely imperialistic, despite its pretensions. As Toni Morrison reminds us the African Other, despite being marginalized, has held a steady and significant presence in Western literature.<sup>4</sup> This presence has served as a prop set up against Europeaness in order to define it. The literary classics from which the West derives its cultural identity have been constructed at the expense of the non-Western world. The imperialistic West has reduced the non-West to an object that accentuates the nuances of the Western subject. Unlike African literature which performs a cultural work of combating this ideology, Western culture unwittingly embraces its ideology of imperialism. Western literature is assumed by its readership to be "aloof from [imperialism], today's scholar and critic is accustomed to accept it without noticing their imperial attitudes and references along with their authoritative centrality."<sup>5</sup> However, imperialism makes up the fabric of Western education, literature, and culture. Said acknowledges that this aspect is so all-consuming that the Westerner or Western educated scholar often blindly accepts and perpetuates its political agenda. Said's observation strikes at the heart of our argument. Our work concerns the moment, as witnessed by the emergence of the African novel, in which the African Other ceased to be silent, to speak back to the West. This study examines the effectiveness of that initial subaltern voice. For that purpose, this paper will look at the author who has been credited as the founder of the African novel: Chinua Achebe.

Albert Chinualomogu Achebe was born into colonial Ogidi, Nigeria in 1930. This simple fact is important because it is not that simple at all; in that, Achebe was born into colonialism. Raised in an Igbo Christian family, he was the product of a mission school upbringing and received his college education in English literature at the University College at Ibadan, Nigeria. As a colonial subject, Achebe received an education in the Western tradition and from a Western perspective. Upon discovering the African Other and the negatively charged discourse around Africa embedded in his studies, Achebe quickly denounced the European assertions of African inferiority by Africanizing his name to Chinua Achebe—a clear and decisive attempt to reinvent himself.

What spurred such a cultural awakening from an otherwise docile colonial subject? For Achebe, it was the encounter with the African Other in his literary education—an invention far removed from Achebe's own experiences as an African—that inspired him to acknowledge Nigeria's cultural difference from England. The novelist has admitted to feeling compelled to write about colonial Nigeria because he could not see himself or his culture in the narrow

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<sup>4</sup> Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination* discusses the marginal role African Americans have historically been assigned in American literature. The author acknowledges how the Othering of Blacks as props in this ethnocentric literary culture discloses the "ways that Americans choose to talk about themselves through and within a sometimes allegorical, sometimes metaphorical, but always choked representation of an Africanist presence" (17).

<sup>5</sup> Edward W. Said. *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage 1994, p. 239.

European depiction of his continent. The colonized native was certainly there but he was not recognizable to Achebe as, “one of the things that set [him] thinking was Joyce Cary’s novel set in Nigeria, *Mr. Johnson*,...and it was clear that it was a most superficial picture of—not only of the country, but even of the Nigerian character, and so [he] thought if this was famous, then perhaps someone ought to try and look at this from the inside” (4). From the start of his career, Achebe admits to having been aware of an “inside” and an implied outside, that representation can be subjective, arbitrary, and powerful. He was not comfortable with the representation of Nigerians and thus moved to change it, to no longer be spoken about but to accurately speak of his culture. For this effort, Achebe has been lauded by scholars from both empire and Metropolis.

The publication of his novel *Things Fall Apart* in 1958 was hailed as the birth of the African novel. Set at the onset of European colonialism, the work aims to revise the colonial encounter and present it from the perspective of the colonized. Simon Gikandi states that Achebe invented African culture in literature by the simple act of rescuing it from the clutches of the European imagination: “I would argue then, that this confidence is precisely what enabled Achebe to shift the idea of Africa from romance and nostalgia, from European primitivism, and from rhetoric of lack, to an affirmative culture” (8). Gikandi is adamant that this particular author has given rich substance to what was once an empty pool of outsider assumptions. Nevertheless this is where Achebe becomes problematic for many scholars like Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ode Ogede who—like Frantz Fanon—believe that African, or colonized, literature must be subversive.<sup>6</sup> The awakening of the consciousness is important for every colonized writer and his realization of difference is a key feature of the literature produced, the true effectiveness of his work is measured by how he approaches and treats that difference. Achebe must be commended for stepping up to the challenge of the colonial encounter by treating it in his works. Like any other effective colonial writer, he does not retreat to the romanticism of pre-colonialism or the realm of religion and spirituality to hide from it.

His work primarily concerns the issue of imperialism with the understanding that oppressed groups do not operate in a vacuum, they exist within a greater framework of Capitalism, imperialism, racism, or whatever hegemonic power is thrust upon them. They are connected to the machinations of the exploiter. A strong Nationalist writer—as Achebe has been anointed—must consider these implications to better represent the lives of such groups. Richard Wright’s “Blueprint for Negro Writing” in discussing the subaltern writer, claims, “that a Negro [or subaltern] writer must create in his readers’ mind a relationship between a Negro woman hoeing cotton in the South and the men who toll in swivel chairs in Wall Street and take the fruits of her toil.”<sup>7</sup> There is no doubt that Achebe makes this connection between Nigeria and England. The novelist’s contribution to post-colonial thought is undeniable; his voice was the first African voice to speak against England’s literary monopoly on representation.

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<sup>6</sup> Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1961, argued that the colonized must completely break away from the colonizer—not only politically but also ideologically. The author argued that the colonized, after the decimation of the indigenous culture, must craft a new culture around the struggle for independence. Ngugi wa Thiong’o in *Decolonising the Mind*, 1986, argues that African writers must write in their own indigenous African language in order to preserve African cultures and address an African audience as well. He faults Achebe for writing in English. Ode Ogede in *Achebe and the Politics of Representation*, 2001, faults Achebe for wiring in the European literary convention of tragedy and thus failing to break away from European literary conventions.

<sup>7</sup> *The New Negro: Readings on Race, Representation, and African American Culture, 1892-1938*: p. 273.

However Achebe's response was merely a reaction to English misrepresentation of Africa. His work never sought to create an alternative fiction to Eurocentric discourse about African culture; it only promoted a different perspective. Nevertheless, Gikandi, amongst others, has elevated Achebe's work as the quintessential image of colonial Africa. African writers and critics, alongside Europeans, have begun to practice a sort of essentialism in which they encourage readers to rely on Achebe's fiction as the preferred image of Africa. Whilst literature can offer us in-depth insight into the human experience, it has its limitation. After all, literature is constructed representation which begs two important questions: who is representing and who is being represented?

Europeans consistently differentiated Africans as savages in works such as James Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. With the entrance of Achebe, a new perspective emerged: that of Western educated Africans. But by the simple virtue of their education in the colonial context, these African intellectuals are locked into a class of their own. Although their effort to accurately represent Africa is appreciated, it falls short as their experiences drastically differ from the rest of the population. Their attempt to repudiate the West's imperialistic practices is even more complicated by their own adopted Western education and philosophies. As Wright aptly demonstrates, "There are times when [a subaltern writer] may stand too close and the result is a blurred vision" (272). This study is not meant to question the authenticity of Achebe's Africaness, however, it is meant to question his works' treatment of Africaness. The evidence indicates that Achebe's representation of Africa is not subversive. It is what will be referred to in this study as corrective; the novelist's vision is "blurred" and compromised by his social location as a member of an educated elite. The argument goes back to Said's concept of Orientalism and involves the extent to which Achebe challenges that system's "authoritative centrality." By analyzing Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, we will prove that Achebe's work is more interested in correcting the misconceptions about Africa than subverting imperialist ideology.

But first, the significance of the novel as a form of representation must be approached. The novel, especially the British canonical novel, does not exist in a vacuum. Instead the novel informs us that there is indeed a relationship between British "culture and empire."<sup>8</sup> Thus it can be concluded that Eurocentric discourses about Africa stemmed out of the relative hegemony that the West enjoyed over the non-West; in that, those discourses were reinforced by the reality and realization of Western imperialism.<sup>9</sup> Nevertheless it is that same tradition that introduced Achebe to literature. Due to his colonial education, he came into his identity as writer by way of the Western canon. The fact that he was able to recognize its Western bias is remarkable. But as the opening epigraph of *No Longer at Ease*, T.S. Eliot's "The Journey of the Magi" attests, Achebe is reluctant to break away from Western tradition. After all this tradition has trained him as a writer; it equipped him with the tools and knowledge to express his identity. The father of the African novel is under the impression that is not the Western tradition of writing that is at fault but how it has been used by its practitioners. Despite the fact that the Western literary tradition is intrinsically imperialistic, Achebe seeks to intercept and redeem this tradition. From his deliberate choice of Eliot's poem, we can infer that Achebe is not claiming decent from

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<sup>8</sup> Edward W. Said. *Culture and Imperialism*; p. 64.

<sup>9</sup> For purpose of this paper, I consulted *The Empire Writes Back* by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin to understand the concept of cultural hegemony. If you want a deeper and full understanding analysis, you should read Antonio Gramsci who originated the concept. See *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1971

African literary tradition but in fact wants to present himself, according to Lloyd W. Brown, as a product of Western tradition “in order to reverse the white man’s exclusivist definitions of history and culture” (25). Achebe affirms that Elliot belongs to Africa as much as the poet does to Europe. The novelist has also utilized this same trend in his earlier work *Things Fall Apart* whose epigraph features Yeats’s “The Second Coming: “Namely in evoking Yeats’s themes, Achebe implies that the sense of history and tradition, the burdens of cultural decay, and rebirth, have all been the African’s lot as well as the Westerner’s.”<sup>10</sup>

Implicit in Achebe’s inclusive declaration are two very problematic assumptions; firstly, that Europe’s racist characterization of Africans is due to the fact that no African, before Achebe, has mastered the art of the colonizer’s language sufficiently enough to correct European misconception; and secondly, that Africans have no literary tradition of their own and must be absorbed into the European tradition—that the only valid African literature is born out of Western intervention. The ‘cultural decay and rebirth’ Brown references alludes to the subject matter of Elliot’s poem to which he connects *No Longer at Ease*. Elliot’s “The Journey of the Magi” with its depiction of the birth of the Christ child is an apocalyptic text about the death of “the old dispensation” and, as observed by Brown, the introduction of a new morality. In this context, this new morality can be interpreted as imperialism and the cultural intervention of the West. The poem proves significant because it points to *No Longer at Ease*’s tone of acquiescence to Western ideology. The novelist’s attempt at realism does not disavow Western literary history. Rather it embraces it through Elliot’s poem. Achebe’s mission in that light is then obvious—the novelist is concerning himself with the performance of the corrective work necessary to prove that the African is not Conrad’s savage or Cary’s *Mister Johnson*.

If his work is merely corrective, doesn’t Achebe then run the risk of regurgitating Europe’s age old Eurocentric discourses about Africa? Achebe once quipped that African literature is not only for entertainment but serves the cultural work of documenting the lives of colonial Africans.<sup>11</sup> Thus he described his work to Kalu Ogbaa as a sort of archive housing the lives of African peoples, professing that “if someone is in search of information, or knowledge or enlightenment about the total life of these people—the Igbo people—I think my novels would be a good source” (64). In his poor choice of words Achebe reduces “the Igbo people” to a discourse and positions himself as the authority on this people. As we have learned from Said, knowledge and information are the tools in which imperialism uses to control colonized groups.<sup>12</sup> The idea is that the more information is collected about a certain group, the easier it is to regulate them. Othering excludes complexity and attempts to understand everything outside of the Subject as singularly and simply as possible. And by pointing to his text as “the total life of these people” Achebe is trapping the Igbo people in one complete static essentialist discourse.

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<sup>10</sup> Lloyd W. Brown. “Cultural Norms and Modes of Perception in Achebe’s Fiction:” p.24.

<sup>11</sup> This is from a 1980 interview that Kalu Ogbaa conducted with Chinua Achebe. The text of the interview can be found in *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*

<sup>12</sup> This practice has historical precedence in British rule of Nigeria. After the Women’s War of 1929 in which Nigerians mounted an intimidating protest against increased taxation, Britain schemed to make its taxation through indirect rule seem a little less foreign to its empire. The crown hired various anthropologists to study the history and culture of the Nigerian masses. Around the information these anthropologists provided, Britain restructured its colonial administration by taxing individuals through a clan system with the hope that this move would make taxation appear more legitimate to the masses. For Britain, its Nigerian colony was encompassed in what little information these anthropologist could gather on a complex culture. Suffice to say, this system soon collapsed since members of clans in Nigerian society are spread out and do not necessarily occupy certain closed regions. This information is available in David Pratten’s historical account of colonial Nigeria work *The Man-Leopard Murders*

He is proposing that the Igbo people are and can never be anything but as they are represented in *Things Fall Apart* or *No Longer at Ease* since they are now being represented by a fellow Nigerian who has taken the reins over from the outside European and his misrepresentations.

However the politics of representation are not that straightforward and are further complicated by the enterprise of colonialism. We have already established that Achebe, due to his education and Christian background, is not an author speaking from inside the Nigerian masses. His eye, although Nigerian, is still one step removed because to his class. His representation of Nigeria, to an extent, is also from an outside. In the colonial context, the very few who are educated are the ones whose voices logically assert themselves in literature, politics, and economics. Ironically their experiences differ immensely from the masses. This discrepancy of experience between these two indigenous groups has been a long standing issue in post colonial thought which has marked Achebe's work as controversial. Ngugi wa Thiong'o and other theoreticians have criticized Achebe extensively for what they perceive as ambivalence to his issue. However their criticism is misplaced because they fail to take into account the mechanism of representation in the colonial context. Colonial writers like Achebe who are born into imperialism have no choice but to appropriate the language and literary conventions of the colonizing culture in which they receive their education.

According to Said's *Culture and Imperialism*, appropriation is a part of indigenous resistance ideology. For instance, Said discusses Ngugi wa Thiong'o's appropriation of the Conrad's river from *Heart of Darkness* in the Kenyan writer's novel *The River in Between*. When we evaluate Achebe's techniques, we must take into consideration that Achebe is a colonial subject, and his appropriation of the colonizing West's forms of expression are necessary. Achebe can no more disown this fact than disown his own heritage as a Nigerian—a continuum of tradition that has been disturbed by colonialism. For him to pursue any forms other than those inherited from colonialism would be dishonest. Ultimately pundits cannot argue that the author forsakes his own culture for another because English has become an integral part of Igbo and other indigenous cultures tied up in Nigerian colonial legacy. But in order to understand this culture of appropriation, we must go back to the nature of what is being appropriating—the novel. This inquiry points why Achebe's work, and by extension third-world literature, must be subversive. Isn't it enough for Chinua Achebe to simply, as he claims, document “the total way of life” of his people?

The answer is no. Literature in the third-world is not simply art, but rather has a goal. Achebe's work cannot be disparaged for appropriating certain features. However it should be noted that the novelist gravely overlooks the role of third-world literature as what Frederic Jameson has called “national allegories.”<sup>13</sup> Achebe's work does not recognize Jameson's assertion that, “Third-world text, even those which are seemingly private...necessarily project a political dimension in the form of a national allegory (69). Third-world literature is, especially the novel, allegorical in that it inform on the culture and identity of the nation. Thus not only is the content of the novel significant, the sociohistoric context in which the third world writer engages the novel is also be taken into consideration. As we've discussed above, the novel is not only a western form of representation but is also intrinsically bound to the culture that produces it. In the hands of the Western novelist, it manifested imperialist ideology. However when

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<sup>13</sup> Frederic Jameson, “Third-World Literature ion the Era of Multinational Capitalism:” p.69. Jameson's view is also shared by Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, and Ngugi wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind*.

approaching the novel, a third-world writers like Achebe must be careful as to how he structures his narrative.

As a third-world writer, Achebe effectively avoids the trap of nativism: the romanticizing of the pre-colonial era. At the same time, he proceeds cautiously against the extreme trap of assuming that the indigenous culture has been completely eviscerated by colonialism. Unfortunately, the novelist does not make much room for Fanon's argument that the culture of the ex-colonial or colonial state is neither in the past nor in the West.<sup>14</sup> This new culture which rests at the indigenous struggle for physical and ideological independence from the colonizer is the third-world novel's national allegory. However, *No Longer at Ease's* inability to engage Fanon prescription marks its lack of a subversive agenda; Achebe's text leans more towards ethnography than national allegory.

Since Achebe's objective asserts the African's worth and reverses the discourse of the West's "civilizing mission," the author presents the negative effects colonial indoctrination has brought upon Nigeria. Igbo culture, especially in the pre-colonial era, is founded on deference to elders.<sup>15</sup> However, David Pratten has keenly observed that colonialism, in its bid to establish indirect rule, undermined this system. With the advent of Western education and Christianity, indirect rule's success and overhaul of the social structure is evident in the younger generation's skeptical attitudes about the chieftaincy and the authority of their elders. Achebe himself recognized the difference between the pre-colonial attitudes towards elders and the new individualistic tendencies imported from the West, and in his own words championed the African model: "Respect is not only valuable to you [the individual], it's also valuable to old people for they are senior members of the society."<sup>16</sup> From Pratten's work, we deduce that during colonialism in Nigeria there was a power struggle between elders and the young educated youth. The elders advocated the traditional way of life as English doctrine undermined their authority. The youths—disillusioned with the lack social mobility of tradition and attracted to the individualism glorified the missionary schools and then abroad—were dissatisfied with the authority of their less educated elders. Nigerian youths thus initiated and formed unions in which they usurped the power of the chiefs and exercised political authority over their domain. In the midst of colonial transition, Nigeria witnessed the emergence of various new cultural identities.

#### *No Longer at Ease*

*No Longer at Ease* dramatizes the cultural Othering colonialism has produced in Nigeria. Achebe relates the anxiety caused by English presence in Africa. The native in Achebe's narrative is accosted by Englishness in daily life—rendering him incredibly aware of his position as an objectified Other. Thus the Igbo sees himself in an unequal relationship with the English hegemony that threatens his cultural identity. Since the English are in charge, it becomes painfully obvious that "greatness has changed its tune. Titles are no longer great, neither are

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<sup>14</sup> Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, p.167: This is this new culture in which the colonized native must bind his novel. He must produce works that emphasize, reiterate, and build a new cultural identity around the struggle for liberation. In this way, a fusion of the pre-colonial cultural and what is imported from the colonizer's presence is possible—a new identity and culture is possible. Fanon's proposal safeguards

<sup>15</sup> From David Pratten's *The Man-Leopard Murders*: The structure of Igbo society is composed of associations based on age with elders at the top of the chain. The older an individual becomes, the more respect and power he/she garners. In the pre-colonial era chiefs and headsmen, descended from certain lineages, were directly in command of villages.

<sup>16</sup> *Conversations with Chinua Achebe*. "An Interview with Chinua Achebe" by Kalu Ogbaa, p.70.



barns or large numbers of wives and children. Greatness is now in the things of the white man. And so we too have changed our tune” (62). This marks the change in aesthetic that colonialism engendered in Africa. Achebe recognizes that there are two worlds: the native world and that of “the white man.” Unlike the English who operate from the superior position of hegemony, Achebe recognizes that the Igbo individual must navigate between two spheres in order to survive in his own society. This novel details how Africans navigated the colonial space while simultaneously conscious of the European cultural other.

The various issues of personal and cultural identity that indigenous people must contend with under colonial rule ground Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*. Africa’s best known author and moralist explores the colonial encounter from the black African perspective. Set in colonial Nigeria at the cusp of independence the narrative relays the rise and fall of protagonist Obi Okonkwo: an Igbo villager who through a community scholarship, by his village of Umuofia, is sent to England to attain—the only hope of advancement in the colony—a European education. Upon his return, he settles into a senior government post which he eventually loses to corruption i.e. acceptance of bribery. In *Obi Okonkwo*, a Western educated African with strong ties to village communal life, the Nigerian struggle to reconcile two worlds in opposition is present. The protagonist occupies a space outside of those worlds as evidenced by the conflict between his Igbo traditions and the Western “book” sensibilities that blind him to the realities of colonial politics. And through Obi’s interaction with his Nigerian colonial environment, one can excavate the concept of self in relation to community. How is Obi hindered or helped by allegiance to his education. Does a black African, despite social advancement, have any real agency in a colonial setting? These are all important inquiries that can be answered by analyzing the central question of Achebe’s work: why does Obi, a black African given the same education thus opportunities and office as a European, fail and succumb to corruption?

We can locate the social tension between African and English cultural others in “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” (44). This evidence helps us locate Obi in the young educated elites of historical colonial Nigeria. What haunts Obi throughout the text is this fear and suspicion of this old African that he must, by virtue of his education, replace and succeed. To him this old African is the reason behind Nigeria’s corruption—a figure that can be redeemed through education. Young Obi Okonkwo, entering the narrative as an idealist who has been to the land of the white men, reaped its benefits, and now has returned to benefit Nigeria, has a limited view of his own people and the issues that plague them. Within the context of the work, the topic of Nigeria’s progress is a major issue. The initial question the novel raises is whether Nigerians are ready for self-determination. Obi’s answer is of course in the affirmative but only through Western education; Nigeria will prosper once the uneducated Africans are removed from office.

Obi’s theory arises out of a need to explain the prevalence of bribery in the Nigerian body politic. The biggest problem in the country—and Obi’s primary concern—is bribery. Because of his Western university education in the Metropolis, Obi is unaware of the nature of life for the average person in Nigeria. He exudes a self-righteousness which confuses fact with invention. The protagonist understands bribery not as a agency for disenfranchised Nigerians but as a cultural proclivity. At Obi’s homecoming reception, the Vice president of the Igbo union offers to bribe a government official for Obi “by seeing some of the men beforehand” (38). in order to

secure a job for him. Later the reader encounters Elise Mark: a young woman so desperate that she offers up her body in exchange for a federal scholarship.<sup>17</sup> Achebe communicates to his reader that bribery has become a tool for natives to attain unmet social needs—a proactive way to get things done. Hence bribery can be seen as a form of agency in an otherwise uncertain era.

In order to represent Obi Okonkwo as an outsider to his own culture and better suggest his ignorance of Igbo society, Achebe juxtaposes Obi with the Eurocentric invention of the uneducated, backward African. The protagonist sees his education abroad as the saving grace that spares him from the disgraceful state of bribery and corruption. Obi's concept of the Old African is the same literary trope that Conrad and Cary, amongst countless English authors, have used to other Africans as savages. The author appropriates this concept in his narrative in order to dispel it as a myth. As Obi internalizes the Western discourse of the African as savage, Achebe stages him as a cultural Other to both the English and non-Western educated Igbos. Obi contemptuously attributes the corruption of the state to the overwhelming lack of education in Nigeria; he is repulsed by bribery because that is something only the uneducated savage deals in. Obi groans: "To [the uneducated] the bribe is natural" (23). When his companion points out that "the Land Officer jailed last year [for bribery]...is straight from University, Obi dismisses that fact and in exchange offers up a cultural Igbo proverb that in his mind justifies bribery (23). The protagonist misguidedly but successfully argues to his companion that bribery is inherent in the culture of the old uneducated Igbos. Obi's passion signifies his adopted English tendency to reject his fellow Africans based on narrow assumptions. In *Obi Okonkwo*, Achebe realizes Frantz Fanon's petty bourgeois intellectual who, detesting the traditional culture, asserts a paternalistic control over the rest of what he perceives as the intellectually lesser population.

The intellectual elite's paternalism can be explained by the harsh experience of colonialism in which indigenous people must band together against uncertain enemy. This is where cultural Othering as a product of chauvinism and exclusivism in the colonial state takes root; where we can understand the need for associations like the Umuofia Progressive Union as resistance mechanisms. This reactive formation of unions against the uncertainty of colonialism portends the way in which colonialism forces itself on indigenous groups. To understand bribery as agency for colonized peoples we must first recognize that in the colonial context there is a disconnection between the colonized population and the colonial administration simply referred to in Achebe's text as "Government." This disconnection stems out of the discrepant experiences of colonialism that are witnessed by the colonizer and the colonized. The colonizing force automatically homogenizes the area that it colonizes as a dependent state. If we look to Anderson's theory, we can view the colonial state as an "imagined community" insofar as it is only real, complete, and intact, in the mind of the imperialist. However the colonized—of per se Nigeria—do not recognize it as such. While acknowledging that all the neighborhood villages are under the common rule of a foreigner, each village keeps to itself and attempts to continue with its pre-colonial way of life. To them, the idea of a national administering government is an extrinsic force gradually encroaching upon their village life. There is a lack of communication between the people who cannot imagine themselves as a nation and the colonial administration that neither understands nor cares for their interest. Achebe emphasizes this native ambivalence and ignorance to the machinations of the invading colonial administration in Obi's memories of village childhood. It becomes apparent from Obi recollection that the village is completely cut-

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<sup>17</sup>*No Longer at Ease*, p. 102-108.

off from the rest of the world: the only source of information arriving through the sensationalized stories of soldiers. FOR their connection to the outside world and affiliation with the world of colonial administration these soldiers are revered and mystified: “It was said that if you touched a soldier, Government would deal with you” (15). To the villagers, Government is a specter haunting the village—something everyone knows exists but cannot fathom. The state from the colonized perspective is an imagined community.

But the village of life of pre-colonial Nigeria operated as a real community in which, due to its relative small size, individuals who were familiar with each other on a daily basis practiced the same communal way of life. The villagers initially did not recognize or even speak the language of their so-called government. Nevertheless they were well versed in the laws, customs, and culture of the village. Lloyd W. Brown in his study of post-colonial fiction including Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* surmises that only the morality and ethics of the village are real to the colonized. Their indifference to Government and the regulation of the state is due to the fact that—since it was created by the foreign colonizer—they have ‘been accustomed to think of a central authority in terms of powerful, alien exploiters’ (33). Historically, this silent space between the indigenous masses and the colonial administration is where the younger educated elite of colonial Nigeria—eager to usurp power from the “Old African” chiefs—consolidated their power as intermediaries. However since these unions, fictionalized as the Umuofia Progressive Union in Achebe’s fiction, developed along ethnic lines, they can also be argued as a form of agency—akin to bribery. These unions were created to look out for the welfare and progress of their constituent ethnic groups. Practicing an exclusivism that rejected non-Western educated Africans, these unions evolved into national political parties. With Nigeria’s modernity in mind, these unions rebuked traditional culture, seeing themselves as the leaders and future of Nigeria.

Although he criticizes this class’s preoccupation with Western culture in his construction of Obi Okonkwo, Achebe never rejects it in his dramatization of the fictional Umuofia Progressive Union. Achebe fails to differentiate between the Nigerian masses and this educated elite class. In his narrative, Obi’s elitist class of the educated few represents the culture and the voice of the Igbo masses as a whole: an assumption that is problematic since this class historically upheld and benefited from colonialism. Pratten’s testimony provides insight into the historical rise of unions such as the narrative’s Umuofia Progressive Union and more importantly Achebe’s bias construction of certain elements.

The novelist does not accurately represent the conflict between traditional customs and modernity. For example, the representation of Christianity: Achebe simplifies the introduction of this religion into Igbo culture. In the context of the novel, Isaac Okonkwo converts for personal reasons—his disillusionment with his father’s customs as it led to the murder of his foster brother. In the logic of Achebe’s narrative, Isaac’s conversion puts him at odds with his fellow non-Christian Igbos who he refers to as heathens. They in return see him as blinded by the white man’s mystification.<sup>18</sup> Achebe presents Christianity as a counter-productive dividing force in Igbo society. The author accuses Christianity of destroying the communal lifestyle that has

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<sup>18</sup> Isaac Okonkwo clashes with his fellow Igbos at various times about religious practice. In one instance: Ogbuefi Odogwu, a village elder, wants to eat a kola—as per tradition—to celebrate Obi’s return home in Isaac’s house. However Isaac quickly surmises this to be a heathen sacrifice to an idol and is enraged that such an act should be performed in his Christian home. P. 59.

traditionally banded Igbos in kinship. From the text it can be deduced that before Christianity it was common practice for an Igbo to feed any child of the village as his own. However in the Christian era when, “a neighbor [offers] a piece of yam to Obi...He shook his head like his older and wiser sisters, and then said: ‘We don’t eat heathen food’” (67). Christianity dramatically altered Igbo society but Achebe’s view of it is a bit too presumptuous. In the colonial encounter many elements—amongst them religion—are appropriated and reinvented by the people who take them on.<sup>19</sup> Although imported from the colonizing culture Christianity was not simply an intruding evil that turned people against each other.

According to Pratten, the conversion ordeal in colonial Nigeria was a result of social unrest and break between the elder generation and the Nigerian youth. Pre-colonial Nigerian social structure consisted of "societies" in which individuals were initiated into certain societies at certain stages of their lives. The society of elders constituted a collective that exercised judicial and executive power in village governance. This society also had an economic value as it required the payment of fees to join--a feature which cemented and added to the wealth of the chieftaincy. However the younger generation, along with the marginalized of society such as the mothers of twins, refused to join this society and opted for available alternative of Christianity instead of paying the heavy fees associated with initiation; “Colonialism and Christianity had created a rift between youth and elders and between varied bases of political authority” (Pratten 93). Christianity provided an alternative model for Igbos who were dissatisfied with the old traditions and customs.

How is this connected to Achebe’s Umoufia Progressive Union (UPU)? Achebe is too sympathetic in his construction of the role unions like the UPU played in the colony. Achebe wants his readers to see this union as the voice and representative of the Nigerian masses. After all they exist within the novel as one communal and democratic entity espousing the proverbs and thus “traditions” of Nigeria. They take on the name of their village and are depicted in promoting the well-being of their community by promoting scholarships, “by taxing themselves mercilessly” in the absence and in spite of the Government (7). They also comfort Obi in his grief and come together to pay his lawyer fees out of duty to kinship. However to view the novel as a big tug of war between the UPU and demoralizing English influence with Obi in the middle is a grave mistake. The one trap some readers of the novel crawl into is associating Fanon’s victimized masses with the UPU. To romanticize Obi’s break with the UP as proof of Obi’s bourgeois proclivities and Western individualism is too simplistic. Even though they shamelessly spew the proverbs of the people, the UPU is not by any means representative of the Nigerian masses.

Historically groups such as the UPU surfaced as urbanization increased along with the number of educated Christianized youths as the power of the chieftaincy declined. These societies were instituted by a new indigenous class freed from the rigid indigenous system by Christianity and industrialization, “For young men mission Christianity became more appealing under Colonialism. Economic development in general, and trade, urbanization and schooling in particular, introduced new categories of social status—the literate teacher and clerks—and

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<sup>19</sup> In *The Man-leopard Murders*, Pratten discusses in his section of “The Spirit Movement of the early 1900s” how Nigerians appropriated Western Christianity to meet their needs. One contention Nigerians expressed with Christianity was its ban on polygamy which was strong in Igbo culture. During the Spirit movement indigenous Christian churches that allowed polygamy sprang up. p.99-114.

increased their physical and political mobility” (94). This class used unions as “political vehicles” to govern their villages and built political authority. However instead of working to advance its society, this class developed into a repressive machine working against the Nigerian masses.

Unlike what Achebe would have his readers believe, the UPU does not represent the Nigerian masses as these unions practiced absolute discrimination against the initiation of the uneducated and illiterate members of Nigerian society. In this way they were able to set themselves off as a class of their own, distinct from the illiterate masses. They acted as intermediaries between the Nigerian populace and the colonial power, “Among the Igbo union rules were drawn up ensuring that disputes were heard by a union prior to judgment in a court of law.”<sup>20</sup> Unions had sufficient room to exploit the masses as they positioned themselves as obstacles between the Nigerian populace and the colonial administration. One interesting aspect of this endeavor is that this usurping class worked in compliance with colonial authority as opposed to the elder chiefs who served to undermine it. Because they benefitted from the colonial machine, these unions promoted colonial Government as an ally of the people. Pratten records that during the Women’s War of 1929 when Nigerian Igbo women were protesting increased taxation, these unions took to the streets to quell the stammer of revolution—reassuring the masses of the benevolence of the Government despite Britain’s violent and bloody response to the protests.<sup>21</sup>

In his narrative, Chinua Achebe also explores the concept of language as cultural marker. In other words, language links one to his culture. Thus people who want emphasize their cultural identity are possessive of their language, or attribute certain significance to its use. In the colonial encounter where several languages from different and often opposing sources converge, the use of language is complicated. Since individuals are dealing with a complex linguistic heritage, it becomes a matter of context. Gikandi’s essay argues that Chinua Achebe’s representation of the colonial encounter from an African perspective relocated Africa from the periphery to the center. British culture, Englishness, then becomes the Other and African culture is posited as the Subject in the world of Achebe’s narrative. This is important to keep in mind if we want to understand the intermediary role that language plays between cultural others: Africans and Europeans. Language works as Achebe’s marker for delineating the cultural make-up of colonial Nigeria.

In one particular scene in *No Longer at Ease*, Chinua Achebe showcases the significance and power of language in the colonial world. The protagonist Obi Okonkwo, working as the secretary to the Scholarship Board which grants federal scholarships to candidates to study abroad, is visited by a stranger. After introducing himself as Mr. Mark and sensing a kinship with Obi because of their common ethnicity as Igbos, the gentlemen proceeds to hint to the possibility of a bribe in exchange for Obi’s help in securing candidacy for his sister. However because of the European present in the room with them, Miss. Tomlinson, and the sensitivity of his subject, Mr. Mark is conscious about how he presents his case. He invokes language to navigate the dangerous waters of his situation: he initially engages Obi in English to greet him. But when he gets to the matter at hand, he code-switches to the native tongue of Igbo. This

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<sup>20</sup> Pratten, p.98.

<sup>21</sup> Pratten, p.114-129.

echoes the way in which the European novel, taking its cue from imperialism has traditionally Othered Africa as a savage territory. Using European languages, most notably English, to speak about and represent Africa without the knowledge and consent of Africans and lacking true knowledge about African culture, Europe has created a Euro-centric discourse about Africa: a space of convenient assumptions to other Africans as savages. In the Western canon, language serves to facilitate the subjugation of non-Western peoples.

In our scene, Mr. Mark exercises a power that allows him to open, close, and navigate between two worlds through the use of language. Unlike the European who—supported by hegemony—only recognizes her language as the only legitimate entity, the native is not limited to only one mode of communication that might compromise his message. The native Ibo speaker communes between two worlds. Within the confine of this scene, Mr. Mark recognizes that there is a sphere for privacy, reserved for fellow Igbos, and a sphere for public exposure. As the colonizing language, English is spoken by both Africans and Europeans. It is also has the effect of under cutting the language barrier between the various ethnic tribes of Nigeria. Thus the shared language becomes a very public mode of communication. However Igbo is a language unique to the Igbo culture and its people. For Mr. Mark and various other Igbo speakers who use it the same way, the Igbo language becomes a private place—a retreat from the prying ears of the English Other. Mr. Mark clearly speaks perfect English as evident by his introduction to Obi. He does not resort to Igbo as a necessity but as a luxury. As a member of Igbo society, a culture which takes pride in its difference, Mr. Mark finds security in his native tongue. His apprehension about using English to communicate such a topic as sensitive as bribery is evident in his action of whispering “some words that he had to say in English” (98). English does not provide the same security. In this sense the Igbo language takes the form of resistance against the English-oriented world—a secret communication that subverts English.

In the conversation between Obi and Mr. Mark, language is used to initiate intimacy. English is played off as a cold, objective, and formal interaction. Igbo, on the hand, is personal and satisfying, signifying kinship and understanding. The reason why Mr. Mark others Miss Tomlinson is to establish kinship and familiarity with his fellow Igbo. By enclosing Obi and himself in this contained world of the mother tongue that Miss Tomlinson cannot penetrate with her English, Mr. Mark is reclaiming the physical space conquered by the British, linguistically. Nigeria can then be re-evaluated as an area of contention between Igbo, a native tongue, and the colonizing English: between Others. And in order emphasis this connection and set both of them in opposition to the English Other, Mr. Mark uses the Igbo language to reaffirm his shared status with Obi as Igbo subjects. Upon entering the Obi’s office, Mr. Mark notices Miss Tomlinson and is quickly started as he recognizes her as a threat to the imagined fraternity he shares with Obi. He side-steps this obstacle with not only the Igbo language, but also he does it with a rhetoric of inclusiveness.

The familiarity he assumes with Obi can only be described as a phenomenon out of Anderson’s work. As soon as he initiates the Igbo language, he delves into the sad story of his sister’s situation as if Obi’s own experiences and perspective correlate with his own. Simply by virtue of their shared heritage, Obi is expected to understand and perform a favor in the name of an imagined fraternity. Mr. Mark remarks, “We are both Ibos and I cannot hide anything from you” (99). He says this confidently as if there are no secrets between Igbos; as if the Igbo language is a mutually shared safe zone away from the mutual enemy of the English Other. He

continues to confide in Obi: “It is all well sending in forms, but you know what our country is” (99). The rhetoric of inclusion continues as he juts in the inclusive “our country” into his speech. Mr. Mark falls into the same trap of nationalism that Anderson warns of, the trap of imagining and assuming that individuals in the same “space” have a similar understanding and experience of reality. All this comes even after Obi establishes that he “didn’t think [that Mr. Mark was even] Ibo” (98). It is the Igbo language that informs Obi of Mr. Mark’s identity as an Igbo. If either one had, for some reason, forgotten the Igbo tongue and spoke only English there would be nothing to connect them to each other. They would simply pass each other on the street without being aware of their common Igbo heritage. Their cultural sameness depended on their shared language

## Conclusion

Achebe’s work in *No Longer at Ease* fails to engender an alternative African canon. Rather his corrective objective and its lack of a subversive agenda suggest that the reason behind the West’s Othering of the African in its canon was due to the Other’s intellectual inability to represent himself. But since the dawn of Western education in Africa, the African—as personified by Achebe the writer—has finally been able to assert his voice in the Western canon by representing himself accurately to his former master. The novelist utilizes *No Longer at Ease* to argue back to Europe that the African savage is an invention. In his work he constructs a complex Africa dealing with the burden of colonial take-over; most specifically the heavy weight of Western cultural hegemony. His argument testifies that Obi Okonkwo is not inherently corrupt. However Obi is presented with no choice by his society but to self-destruct since the colonial system set in place by England proves to be inherently flawed.

Obi’s trials and tribulation in the narrative speak to Brown’s thoughts on the indigenous perceptions of colonial Government. Since colonized people only think of “central authority in terms of powerful alien, exploiters,” Obi finds himself in a precarious position once he accepts employment in government. The indigenous perception of Obi’s position is, “To occupy a ‘European post’ was second only to actually being a European” (105). Obi, an indigenous Black man, has infiltrated the domain of the cultural other. However it is only superficial infiltration since posts left by Europeans have simply been filled by Africans. Obi’s mistake is assuming that his Western education would qualify him to survive in this position—without considering the fact these posts were not design for Africans to inhabit. He soon finds himself living like a European in Africa, a lifestyle that involves a certain car, a personal driver, an expensive house, and the repayment of his scholarship. He also soon finds himself accruing a tremendous amount of debt: making payments not only on his lifestyle but also for his parents as well as financing his brother’s education. His attempt at reconciling an English individualist lifestyle with his African communal responsibilities becomes so destructive that he is forced to accept bribes in order to make ends meet. As the story concludes the protagonist becomes what he detested the most—the bribe taking African of his contempt.

Obi’s downfall is the result of his misguided attempt at performing the role of a European in colonial Africa. The colonial administrative system does not recognize the African citizen in which it is meant to govern. It is a machine for Europeans to govern. At his trial, Obi becomes the target of the same homogenizing Othering that he subjected non-Western educated Africans to when Mr. Green remarks, about Obi’s actions: “The African is corrupt through and through.” (3). In *No Longer at Ease*, Achebe demonstrates to Obi that bribery is not inherent in Igbo

society but it is something whose need is fostered by colonial culture. Initially an outsider unable to understand bribery, Achebe brings Obi into the inside by having him experience bribery as it functions in Igbo society. It can then be argued that Achebe attempts to correct Obi's Christian missionary and Western education induced misconceptions about Africa. Obi's baptism addresses England as well—denouncing English hubris. Achebe's corrective work in *No Longer at Ease* indicates the novelist's incredible popularity outside of Africa to the point in which the author has become synonymous with African literature. Westerners often remark on the beauty of not only Achebe's prose but also the dignity and humanity he artfully instills in his reader. However Achebe does nothing to challenge the West outside of providing brief exoticism. The novelist works better as an ethnographer of African culture than as the renegade inventor of Africa in literature.



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