Chapter - III

No Longer At Ease

*No Longer At Ease* (1960) is Achebe’s successful attempt at anatomizing the contemporary society, which has suffered a loss of values due to its enslavement at first, and colonization later, by the European imperialist powers.
The novel is a poignant drama of human values celebrated the year of Nigeria’s Independence in 1960 and was awarded the Nigerian National Trophy for Literature. Ebele Eko observes the fact that

*Though set in Nigeria and concerned with Negro rather than white problems, is refreshingly free from rancor or hysteria.*

Just as Okonkwo and Ezeulku exemplify the grandeur and nobility of a heroic age, albeit with its flames, Obi and Odili exhibit, with graphic clarity, the absence of a searching self-analysis and the concomitant lack of a purposeful existence, which might have been caused by a decadent culture of degraded values.

*No Longer At Ease, might ot be as exciting or as heroic as Things Full Apart, but for the reputation of its writer, it mocked another step forward.*

Obi Okonkwo, the pivotal figure, the village boy with a brilliant academic record of eight distinctions at the senior Cambridge level ultimately finds himself no longer at ease because he stands, as it were, at the “cross-roads of culture:”. A victim of an inescapable predicament that the self-conscious, western – educated individuals of his society are destined to suffer. Obi does not want to be called a ‘hero’ in the sense in which his grandfather Okonkwo did. Okonkwo
was able to rise to heroic heights as the communal ethic of his society’s culture remained undisturbed and intact.

Obi is an individual exposed to the old values of Umuofia, however remote, as well as those of modern Nigeria, which is at the threshold of Independence. He is not the unusual type. He is not a particularly memorable and colourful character. There are dozens of such youngmen in modern societies.

If Okonkwo of *Things Fall Apart* is an embodiment of the ruling tenets of his culture such as unparalleled courage and inflexible will, Obi Okonkwo, his grandson, belonging to an age of unprecedented change, is a typical product of a modern era that mixes motives and values, a miserable amalgam, the offshoot of a weak, hybrid culture.

If in *Things Fall Apart* Achebe captures the nuances of tribal life and its homogenous culture, he presents with equal success the modern civilized life of present day Lagos with its attendant evils in *No Longer At Ease*.

*The strength of the novel does not lie in its characterization, but in its brilliant description and analysis of situations and conflicts.*³
What makes Obi truly tragic is that there is no escape from the stranglehold of native culture and the vice-like grip of its western counterpart consisting of a strange set of values. Obi Okonkwo does intend to live a clean and exemplary life and is prepared to play a vital role in eradicating social and economic evils that seem to stand in the way of the Nigeria of his dreams. He realizes, in due course, the impossibility of bringing salvation to a society ridden with a set of degenerate values.

The myth that African is nothing but a “long night of savagery” has paradoxically come true with the advent of Western civilization. Achebe observes,

What happens is that some of the worst elements of the old are retained and some of the worst of the new are added on to them.⁴

In the final analysis, as in Things Fall Apart, in No Longer At Ease too, it is proved that the individual and the society are equally responsible for shaping the patterns of existence.

Perfection as culture perceives it is not possible while the individual remains isolated.⁵
Obi’s sentimental ties to his motherland prove rather too tenacious, he feels alienated and it is this alienation that accounts for his tragedy.

Being a man of reflective nature, Obi is not swayed by emotions unlike his grandfather Okonkwo. He is careful in his relations with the European Secretary Miss Tomliuson. Violence and Fury, the enemies of culture, are never found in him. He is neither hypocritical nor coward. He finds through the craftiness of the Europeans who devised soft conditions for themselves but wouldn’t like the Africans holding senior pasts to take advantage of the same.

Obi’s “right reason, ideas and light” are a defence against anarchic tendencies such as emotional outburst and ‘haughty resistance.” His ideas and attitude with regard to his proposed marriage to Clara, and his frequent introspection over the European situation in Africa, not to mention his views on bride price or the ‘colonial mentality’ of his friends Joseph and Christopher are an index of his character and personal refinement. When his father Isaac opposes his intended marriage on grounds of Clara’s Osu background, Obi questions his Christian wisdom, which is supposed to draw no line of discrimination among the people of this world.
The Ibos believe in a super-human heritage. “Mother is Supreme” is one of their oft-quoted sayings and beliefs. In keeping with it, Obi holds his mother in high regard and remembers her love and her strength of mind and her sacrificing nature. He is struck dumb when he hears his mother’s dream. It symbolizes the erosion of traditional values by anarchic forces, as she infers. Instead of bringing people together, the caste system has only widened the gulf that exists among them.

Obi’s anarchy is all the more evident in his inability to explain to Clara about hurdles in his way of their marriage. He feels a sense of relief at his mother’s death.
It is a peace that passeth all understanding.\textsuperscript{6}

There is a certain lack of integrity in Obi’s from the beginning in spite of his strong-mindedness. Abiola Irele points out,

\textit{Obi is something of an aesthete, but his culture is manifest in an attachment to things that are of no real consequence.}\textsuperscript{7}

Being idealistic, however, does not mean being weak-minded, argues Achebe,

\textit{I do not accept the idea that Obi was a weak character. I think he is very strong; it is just that his strength is not the kind that is particularly appreciated in the West. He was more of an artist than an activist. He meditated rather than acted, but he was not weak.}\textsuperscript{8}

Obi is disillusioned with Lagos, which he imagines is idyllic but which in reality is a scenario of dead dogs, bad smells and sewage. His disillusionment with his own heritage too is complete when it renders his western education futile by drawing lines of discrimination between one people and the other.

The common struggle of the educated Africans who stand confounded at the meeting point between acceptance and rejection of a life of hybrid culture is evocatively portrayed in the tom character
of Obi Okonkwo. He too is the butt of tragedy even as his grand sine
Okonkwo was, in a different phase of the culture of the race. Obi is
altogether unequal to the situation and fails to decide on a definite
course of action. He lacks the conviction and courage of his ancestor
partly due to which he couldn’t rise to the former’s heights of nobility
and heroism. Even as he is afraid of a cold bath, he is apprehensive
of challenges in life.

A man of culture cannot afford to fall short of right action, the
falling short of which may fail him in achieving a ‘harmonious
expansion’ of all powers.

Obi lacks a balanced view of life, similarly, he is at a loss when
clara tauants him for treating Miss Mark to a drink and giving her a
lift back home. Such confusion of values indicated the baffled mental
make-up of Obi’. His ‘terrible’ feeling after receiving his first bride,
evern, or his inclination to laugh at his ludicrous way of life accepting
favours in flesh and money, his lack of enthusiasm in sharing his
feeling of delight over the aforesaid pleasure with his friend
Christopher or his lack of elation after settling his financial
commitments or his aversion at a certain stage to accept bribes,
convey the inherent good in his character.
Obi lacks steadfast resolution, the most important concept of life. Obi’s ‘reality’ is his inability to find a decent scale of values for himself in his predicament of cross-cultural conflict. A fellow countryman description of him as “Beast of no nation” fits him like a glove:

*He no longer felt guilt. He too, had died. Beyond death there are no ideals and no humbug, only reality.*

The change for the worse in Obi is seen when, his ideals that he once believed in, do not appeal to him any longer. As Rosemary Colmer says,

*He has, in this single gesture, abandoned all the ideals which have sustained him for the past five years. He is rejecting not just a style of poetry but a mode of thought and a code of moral values.*

When Obi is split within, with his mind divorced from intellect, his power of decision – making is lost. His world is what it is because of the tensions within. The people of Umuofia know well that their society is no longer compact and homogenous. But what merits our appreciation is their culture, which is alive even to some extent.
Even in the cities, if you look carefully enough, you can see patterns of the part too; it depends on how closely you look. If you take Lagos, for instance, today: you will find that many villages from the hinterland are presented here as units what you might call the improvement societies. Each village has its own meeting, perhaps the women have their dances and so on and the men hold some traditional celebrations and so on. So, the patterns although much paler today, are still there.¹²

The manliness and brotherliness appears to be the present dominant need. Igbo people have an amazing ability to form a Progressive Union that works for the Economic security of their tribe. The Umaofians form their Union.

With the aim of collecting money to send some of their brighter youngmen to study in England.¹³

Obi is given a grand send-off by the villagers, with enough warming not to fall for the “sweet things of the flesh”¹⁴, for that would draw him away from his people. There is also an ardent appeal to God. The same strong bond of fraternity draws Clara close to a seasick Obi whom she helps on their voyage home. She speaks to him in Ibo as if the mean.
‘We belong together : we speak the same language.’

Achebe’s Umuofia, like R.K. Narayan’s Malgudi, is a sensitive canvas on which is depicted in detail the change and growth in the culture of the people. Just as trade, education, better living conditions found their way into Malgudi, with a generous share of English usage in the daily intercourse among the country folk, the society of Umuofia too has come under the influence of the alien culture. But the ‘new dispensation’ could not succeed in the total annihilation of the Ibo ethic, even as it happened in the case of India. There is, however, a change in the cultural scene as a result of the changing times. The native culture now reflects the makings of a hybrid culture.

*No Longer At Ease* presents the duality in the Umuofian situation.

*Aspects of the English colonial culture (bureaucratic administration, the city, the English languages and the written word, above all, the competitive ethic, materialistic values and the power of money) ambiguously co-exist with traditional values and systems ...*
Obi is forced to learn the traditional folk tales in spite of his father’s scorn because the old ways are still important in his village. His European upbringing renders him ignorant of certain native social modes such as the clan’s disdain of the Osus, the payment of bride price, or even speaking Ibo, his mother tongue, without tumbling. Short coings such as these add to his disintegrated view of life and prevent him from evolve into a perfect individual. The anarchy in the society is thus largely responsible for his fall from being a cultured to a confused individual.

In the Nigeria of Obi’s existence, the ‘sharing’ takes place only among the “Umuokorobia”, the top people. The result inevitably violence. Everybody tries his best to bget to the top through the means of offering bribes. The novelist writers:

In Nigeria the Government was ‘they’. It had nothing to do with you or me. It was an alien institution and people’s business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble.17

Thus one evil paves the way to another. With their honour rooted in dishonor, the people successfully distort traditional wisdom
to suit their life of anarchism thus defending their selfish ends and corrupt practices. The noveslit portrays:

The man who conquered us and colonized us also brought his language and his administration and his style of life and everything. These are some of the problems, some of the facts of our existence.\textsuperscript{18}

Distortion of old values and loose morals, Bohemian life style of the moderns – all contribute to the anarchy of the Nigerian society.

The shocking disappearance of fifty pounds from Obi’s car, the song in the Imperial which contains the strains of a decadent culture which tells the young men how to win a lady and also warns the parents,

\textit{Father and mum, please hold you girls.}\textsuperscript{19}

People crave for Western homes, plastic, tinsel, Nylon, georgettes and other material. Nylon was accepted as a lovely dress among girls.

A once rigid code of conduct that placed premium on a girl’s chastity to quality her for marriage disintegrates with the advent of western education. An educated girl like clara with her languish approach to morals has no one but herself to blame for an unwanted
pregnancy. Ironically, it is the west that is shown to be more scrupulous. Social manners and etiquette are more towards the materialistic ends and are never free from conceit.

People’s speech, now perfect, now pidgin, is dependent upon their relationship with each other. Sam Okoli speaks impeccable English, Christopher speaks stylish English to obi. Fiction appeals to him more than facts. It is the same with Joseph whose speech depends on the particular person and place. These language habits reveal the sense of flux and uncertainty that the Lagos scenes generate.  

20 The impression of Western society as observed by Obi has its tragic – comic dimensions:

*The village code of conduct has been violated but a more embracing and a bigger one has not been found.*  

The heroic mould of Okonkwo’s character depicted against the traditional cultural background is not longer valid and hence is shattered in the present context of the native society. The educated native is in a worse condition than his brothers in the bush, says Achebe:
His abortive effort at education and culture though leaving him totally unredeemed and unregenerated had nonetheless done something to him – it had deprived him of his links with his own people whom he no longer even understood and who certainly wanted none of his dissatisfaction or pretentions.

Obi Okonkwo, thought intelligent and detached, is not the “mind at last is rest” as his name ironically indicates. He is anywhere but at rest, because he and others of his society similar to him are exposed to “glosified exploitation” of the alien power, and became victims of “emasculcation”, a process set in motion by the disruption of the old and the demands made by the new ways of life. Obi’s situation calls for change as well as stasis. It is this tension that defeats him at last.

The gradual decadence in their cultural life has come as a result of the destruction of it by foreign elements that did not understand the background and deeper meaning of the Ibo philosophy. The probable solution for such societies as those of Obi is to evolve a sense of awareness. Experience, says Achebe, “is what we are able and prepared to do with what happens to us.” The proper stuff of experience lies not in losing one’s own self-respect, which could
happen to any people, but in masterfully responding to the demands of change and thereby enriching the culture of the society.

Certainly, our life is a mixture of necessity and freedom, chance and choice. African societies like those of Nigeria and Umnofiga have surrendered their freedom to force, sheer physical force, not out of will but of necessity – at the most it is an act of prudence. They realize it but as Achebe points out, the African natives should get rid of the tenacious grip of “moral inferiority” to which they have submitted during the colonial era.
References


10. Ibid., p. 151


15. Ibid., p. 22.
