

Education as an Ideological Instrument: A Postcolonial Reading of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract: This paper is an attempt to reveal how education, as an ideological instrument, was used in colonizing African people in the light of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. Colonists have always used subtle and indirect ways to colonize nations before and after independence; one of these ways was ideology. Education, as one of the most powerful ideological instruments, has been used in controlling nations and changing them into people who accept the rule of colonists quite willingly. This paper tries to clarify how education is manipulated in the hands of colonizers and how the colonized who has been educated through this system gradually loses his identity. Chinua Achebe, the great African postcolonial writer, has had a significant role in the fight against colonization and helping the African people to regain their original African identity. In this novel, he has tried to depict the relationship between European education system and the corruption of the African people through this system.

Key words: Education • Ideology • Postcolonialism • Chinua Achebe • *No Longer at Ease*

INTRODUCTION

Imperial power uses different ideological instruments as indirect means to gain control over colonized nations. Based on Althusser's theory, ideological instruments make nations accept the power of the ruling class and change them into people who are willing to be dominated. Education, religion and media are some of these ideological instruments which have a great influence on the lives of people [1].

According to the definition offered by Randall Curren in *the Philosophy of Education*, the term education refers primarily to the systematic guiding and controlling of human activities to improve their methods of learning and he believes that education involves the transmission of culture (p. 3). Kevin Harris in his book *Education and Knowledge: the Structured Misrepresentation of Reality*, states that education is primarily about "the transmission of knowledge". The main characteristics of education are that it is "formal", "institutionalized" and usually "provided by the state" and its aim is to provide vast knowledge of the world (p. 1). According to this view, education helps people gain broad knowledge about the world through its three special functions. First, it selects from the vast scope of knowledge the part which it considers worth

knowing. Then, it provides the means through which people can gain that knowledge. Finally, it provides expertise to make sure the knowledge is known. This system embodies the knowledge as an established and unchangeable set of facts and claims to be entirely objective, but the truth is that its work is not necessarily neutral. Harris believes that the educational system provides a special kind of knowledge which gives its audience a certain viewpoint about the world. Education, in his view, is not a neutral, political system and provides a prearranged outlook for people (p. 2). In the education system, students do not just learn English, math or history; in fact they learn what the ruling class regards as appropriate English, math or history and consider it as the accurate and objective knowledge (p. 74).

Curren confirms Harris's notion of education and believes that education is a political act provided by the state in which education has to create the feeling that the existing condition is the best for the public, whether in a capitalist society in which the status quo is against the majority, or in a democratic society. Here education transmits not only disguised knowledge, but also ignorance. This ignorance is about hidden knowledge that is against the interests of the ruling class [2].

Paulo Freire in his article "Banking V. Problem-Solving Models of Education" analyzes the function of the school systems in colonial societies. He stated that colonizers preserved a "profitable situation" for the minority by oppressing the majority and controlling them. In this theory, Freire states that schools in colonial societies do not accomplish moral ideals, quite on the contrary. In fact the method of the educational system in such societies was and is based on a "banking model". In this model the school presents a fixed form of knowledge about the world and students accept these pieces of information quite passively. He believes a true liberating education system is based on dialogue, thinking and problem solving method (p. 11). Freire analyzes the teacher-student relationship in school structures. This relationship, based on his analysis, has a narrative characteristic; it involves a narrating subject that is the teacher and a listening object that is the student. As Freire says in his article on the school systems in Capitalist societies, "education is suffering from narration sickness". In this system the teacher represents reality as a set of unchanging, predefined facts. Education is an act of "depositing" in which the teacher is the "depositor" and the students are the passive "depositories" whose sole function is to receive, memorize and repeat the content (p. 68). Freire claims that part of the ideology of the colonizer is to project ignorance onto the others. When the students accept their ignorance, the existence of the teacher is justified. The banking concept of education considers human beings as manageable and controllable creatures; the more they fill their mind with the oppressor's deposit, the more they lose their ability of critical thinking. The educator tries to regulate the way knowledge enters into the mind of his recipient. Since the intention is for him or her to be an inactive and submissive receiver, the only important thing that the educator has to do is to make his object more passive and he does so by controlling the knowledge that enters into the mind of the oppressed. Freire believes that most of the approaches used in the education system under colonialism are put in place to prevent serious thinking, like verbalistic reading, the criteria for evaluating knowledge, the distance between the teacher and the student, etc (p. 69). The banking concept of education tries to increase the credulity among students and let them believe that reality is something that takes place in an ivory tower and is totally objective (p. 74).

Based on the ideas of Curren, Harris and Freire, education system in colonial countries represents a set of information which is disguised as neutral, but in fact

it is designed to make the colonized alienated from his original values and absorbed to those of the colonizer. Since the colonized is totally dependent on the colonizer, to gain a status in his own land, he has to enter this education system. Through studying in this system he gradually loses his own beliefs and values and start cherishing those of his master.

One postcolonial writer who has struggled to depict the negative influences of ideological instruments is Chinua Achebe. He was born in Nigeria and his parents were devout Christians. They were in an Evangelical church and his father was an instructor in Christian catechism in the church missionary society.

Chinua had a strict Christian upbringing, but most of the people around him lived a traditional life. Achebe's family was educated and from the higher class. Since they spoke English, they had a privileged status in that time. Although they lived, according to Achebe, in the "crossroads of cultures", where the majority of the people had a different style of life, from that of his family and the Christian minority, they could get along with each other and live in peace. Chinua started to learn English when he was eight. Until then, he tried to learn his Igbo language and was proud of his culture and his native language [3]. The colonial situation had a great influence upon the life and education of most African writers such as Chinua Achebe and it became the subject of their novels too. Achebe won a scholarship to study medicine, but after a while he gave it up and decided to study English literature, religious studies and history. The reaction of Achebe to the presentation of African people and Africa in European novels has had a great influence on his novels. Achebe of course, did not believe in the stereotypes that European writers have created about Africa in their works. Like any other Nigerian writer he believes that literary works must deal primarily with the problems of society. He asserts that "art is and always was, at the service of man...any good story, any good novel, should have a message, should have a purpose" (p. 8).

In societies where solidarity and community are more important than individuality, the didactic potential of novels is very important. Chinua Achebe in one of his essays "The Novelist as Teacher" views educating as one of the most important duties of the novelist. The writer must teach his reader about his country and what he needs to know is to resist the colonial power. There are two explanations about why the function of literature in Africa is to serve society. The first one is that literature in Africa was produced as a counter-discourse to the presentation of colonial

literature. The second one is the understanding that it is the role of the writers and critics to be guides for their societies [4].

Chinua Achebe was one of the first writers who attempted to revive "African culture". He was also the first person who created a new African literary tradition in his novels and this is the fundamental characteristic that makes his novels outstanding. In fact he has had a great influence upon the African education system. He abolished the colonial education system in Africa and tried to establish a new one. Achebe wants to help his society to have belief in itself and forget the years of denigration. He believes that the best way to approach this aim is through education.

DISCUSSION

The first six chapters of the novel are about Obi's return to Umuofia after having studied at an English university. They introduce the conflicts between his traditional African life and his newly shaped ideas resulting from the European education system. Harris claims that education is the "lived-ideology", the manipulation of the mind and its function is to inject a special world view in the people's mind. Education legitimizes itself and disguises the views and values it is spreading as the best one [5]. In the book *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader* the educational system at the time is compared to "a great cannon in the artillery of empire"[6]. This simile may seem inappropriate, because as Gramsci believes ideology is domination by consent, but education is taking another domain which is the people's mind. Legal forces of the government strengthen this process, for example to enter most official positions, the knowledge of the English language is necessary. This colonial policy, in a subtle way, injects the superiority of English culture into the people's mind with the "fetish" of English language [7].

Chinua Achebe chose the title *No Longer at Ease* from T.S.Eliot's poem, *The Journey of the Magi*. This poem is a dramatic monologue by the Magi, the wise men who brought gift to the baby Jesus Christ. T.S.Eliot wrote this poem after his conversion into Christianity. These Magi, after enduring significant pain and difficulty, returned home but they seemed unimpressed by the infant. The birth of Christ was the death of the world of magic, astrology and paganism. Although they believed in incarnation, this did not change their ideas about Christianity. After the death of their beliefs, they basically waited for their own deaths. They returned to their countries but they were no longer

at ease there. It seems that Achebe chose this title, because of the relevance between this poem and the novel. Obi Okonkwo, the central character of the novel, alienated from his own culture and not even sympathetic towards England, the country he studied in, is no longer at ease in his country.

In the following chapters Obi confessed that his first impressions of Nigeria were formed in England. When Obi arrived in his country, he went to Lagos; the city which was placed between Europe and Umuofia and was closer to Obi's heart. The picture he had in his mind about Nigeria was different from the real one. His poems about this country were a sort of pastoral poem with images of birds, beautiful scenery and clean weather. He had no idea about the slums of Lagos. These images change after his arrival. This city was turned into an African-European city; there was no darkness; it was full of light. The city had lost its African tradition and was divided into two parts. One part of the city belonged to the upper class people; the majority of whom had European posts like Obi. The other part which Obi had not seen before was the slums. Obi's stereotypes changed after seeing this place. In fact he became disillusioned. After a while he went to Umuofia to visit his family and made some mistakes upon his arrival. The people who had sent him to England expected a transformation. They had their own stereotypes about a person who had studied in England. Everyone on Obi's arrival was clad in a formal dress named *agbada* except their guest of honor who appeared in his shirtsleeves. This was his first mistake. People expected to see a young man who had studied in England dressed in a fashionable way. His second mistake was his lecture. The secretary who spoke before Obi was interrupted by cheers, because he spoke formally and used difficult words. But Obi used simple words and said that 'service' is the aim of education not high salaries. Obi belonged to that avant-garde group who wanted to show their independence and lack of interest in these formalities.

The Benefits of European Education in Africa: When Obi decided to continue his studies abroad, the people of Umuofia wanted him to study law, so he could defend their land cases against their neighbors. But Obi studied English and as Achebe stated in his novel it was not the first time he pursued his self-will. Although he was brought up in a culture in which solidarity and tribal life was of prime importance, his education in England inculcated the value of individualism and self-will in his mind. Education as a colonialist instrument presents the values and texts of English as universal and turns

English into a norm, while internalizing in the mind of the colonized his inferiority. The students in this educational system have to memorize the texts, repeat them and recite them obediently. This is one reason why literary education is always a matter of discussion in post-colonial literatures [6]. Gauri Viswanathan states that although the study of the colonized literatures sometimes comes alongside the study of English literature, the latter has always had a prerogative status. John Docker, in his article "The Neocolonial Assumption in University Teaching of English" claims that there is still an Anglocentric assumption ruling in university teaching of English. In Fanon's phrase there is a hierarchy of culture in which the colonizer stands at the top and the colonized at the bottom. This ruling culture claims to be the only source of what is considered to be standard in every aspect of life including literature. This system implants its norms in a way that even when students are studying postcolonial literature, they can neither escape from these norms, nor can they form their own critical ideas (p. 444).

Almost everybody believed in the power of education. Although Obi's father was an old African man, he also believed in the spell of words. He had lots of books in his room and cared a lot about them. He said that the power of the white men was in their printed book and the words written in them. The Africans wrote with a special material too, but that faded over time. It was the printed word of the white men that never faded. Isaac thought that the power of the Bible was in these words too.

European education had some benefits for the people of Umuofia who were supporting Obi to get his degree from England. As stated they wanted to defend their land cases against their neighbors. When the missionaries came to Africa, part of this problem was resolved. They gave back some of the lands to their owners and these lands had legal documents. Although they did this in order to mollify and control Africans better than before, Africans were happy to have part of their lands back. Now this process was going to be accomplished by the force of knowledge, so the people of Umuofia wanted Obi to study law. Although Obi studied English instead of law, his European degree and his post in the civil service, the highest rank below a European, could be of help too. The problem was that they did not know that this education along with all its benefits would also bring alienation. Obi's ideas and way of thinking was changed and he no longer believed in his traditional life; besides his knowledge helped him to see the corruption of his

country. At first he wanted to help his people, but then he began to hate them.

Education Vs. Christianity: Obi and his family were Anglicans. Hence the ceremony that the people of Umuofia held for his arrival was not a traditional ritual but a Christian prayer meeting. Although years ago at the arrival of missionaries the role and effect of Christianity was great, it was gradually being replaced by the effect of education. The light that was transferred to people by the gift of Christianity now arose from education. Obi who belonged to the new generation was not a strict Anglican like his father. When he was a child he used to mistranslate the Bible and now that he was a grown up his belief and morality were shaped by the European education system. Even the catechists living in Africa had a reverential view toward education. The Reverend Samuel Ikedi of St. Mark's Anglican Church interpreted the return of the educated Obi from England as the fulfillment of a prophecy and the bringing of light:

- 'The people which sat in darkness
- Saw a great light,
- And to them which sat in the region and shadow of death

To them did light spring up.' [8].

They interpreted words and knowledge as the beginning of the fear of the Lord:

'In times past,' he told him, 'Umuofia would have required of you to fight in her wars and bring home human heads. But those were days of darkness from which we have been delivered by the blood of the Lamb of God. Today we send you to bring knowledge. Remember that the fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom [8].

Although Umuofian culture was mixed with Christianity, there was a discrepancy between this culture and Christianity. When Obi decided to marry Clara, the woman he loved, he thought that in spite of her being *osu* (an outcast) his father would agree with their marriage, because they were Anglicans, but this was not the case. In this situation the power of their African custom was stronger than Christianity. His father said that *osu* is like leprosy and he did not want to bring leprosy to his family. Finally Isaac told the story of his life. He said that he left his family to join the Anglican church and that his father cursed him. He believed that what was happening to him was because of

his father's curse. Obi never believed in these ideas, but he did not dare to declare this. He had to stick to his family.

Obi's mission-house upbringing and European education had made him a stranger in his country-the most painful thing one could say to Obi [8].

Even Christopher, Obi's friend who was an educated man disagreed with this marriage. He told Obi:

You may say that I am not broad-minded, but I don't think we have reached the stage where we can ignore all our customs. You may talk about education and so on, but I am not going to marry an *osu*.' [8].

The Tragedy of Colonizer and Colonized: Obi was working in a European post, where everything was under the direct control of Europeans. Mr. Green, the head manager of the place where Obi was working, was an English man. He had his own stereotypes when he came to Africa. Mr. Green's Africa was the country of head-hunters, weird rituals and wild men who needed to be tamed; the Africa of his garden and steward boy. He was going to bring light to this heart of darkness. In fact, Obi found some strong similarities between him and Kurtz in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. When Mr. Green came to Africa he saw a completely different place. His ideals were ruined and he had to invent other illusions about the land to satisfy himself. He could not stand thinking about Africa's independence. He swore that he would leave Africa if it gained independence. Mr. Green thought that Africans were corrupt by nature and regarded this as a matter of fact:

'They are all corrupt,' repeated Mr. Green. 'I'm all for equality and all that. I for one would hate to live in South Africa. But equality won't alter facts. 'What facts?' asked the British Council man, who was relatively new to the country? There was a lull in the general conversation, as many people were now listening to Mr. Green without appearing to do so. 'The fact that over countless centuries the African has been the victim of the worst climate in the world and of every imaginable disease. Hardly his fault. But he has been sapped mentally and physically. We have brought him Western education. But what use is it to him?' [8].

Mr. Green believed that even the educated Africans would not help their people. He used to pronounce the word educated with distaste. He blamed the Africans for wasting their money on their personal welfare and not even spending a penny of it for their country. It does not occur to him that creating such an incentive would require independence.

Obi believed that Mr. Green's life was a tragedy and said that he had to write the tragedy of the Greens of his country. When he was on the ship with his friend, Obi said that he had his own definition of tragedy. In his opinion, death is not the basic element of tragedy. The real tragedy is never resolved and you have no escape:

Yes. Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly forever. Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies and we feel a purging of the emotions. A real tragedy takes place in a corner, in an untidy spot, to quote W.H. Auden. The rest of the world is unaware of it. Like that man in *A Handful of Dust* who reads Dickens to Mr. Todd. There is no release for him. When the story ends he is still reading. There is no purging of the emotions for us because we are not there [8].

When Obi was analyzing the tragedy of Mr. Green's life, he was pleased with his conclusions. But he did not ruminate about his own condition. He had no way out of his debts and could not afford his living expenses. He was losing the woman he loved because of the customs of his country. His parents had financial problems and were not getting along with Obi's situation. In fact, the real tragedy was Obi's life. Except his friend, no one was aware of his condition and there was no solution for it. After a while, he reached a point where he cared about no one, so he accepted a bribe. When his mother passed away, his sorrows did not last for long. After a day he felt relaxed and calm.

At the end of the novel, when he has lost everything, he went to bed reading a book by A.E.-Housman. There he found a poem which he had written two years ago in London. It is about Nigeria:

- God bless our noble fatherland
- Great land of sunshine bright,
- Where brave men chose the way of peace,
- To win their freedom fight.
- May we preserve our purity,
- Our zest for life and jollity.
- God bless our noble countrymen
- And women everywhere.
- Teach them to work in unity
- To build our nation dear;
- Forgetting region, tribe or speech,
- But caring always each for each [8] .

This poem clearly depicts the contradiction of Obi's thoughts and ideals when he was studying in England with his thoughts after his return to Nigeria. During the

years of studying in England he became familiar with certain European ideas like universalism and humanism. Obi wanted to create a new Nigeria. One in which African and Christians live in peace, particular characteristics of Africa were sacrificed to maintain peace and the colonizer and the colonized lived happily together. He believed that it is in the hands of the western educated men to save Nigeria, but things turned out quite differently.

Taking Bribe: a Regular Subject in the Colony: Obi and his friend Joseph discussed bribery a lot and in general bribery is one of the subjects that is widely discussed in the novel. When he was going to take a job in the civil service, the first question the chairman asked was "Why do you want a job in the civil service? So that you can take bribes?". The interesting part about taking bribes in these institutions was that taking them actually caused fewer problems than refusing it. Obi was thinking about all these problems. On the one hand he could not make ends meet anymore and on the other his determination for an honest life did not let him accept bribes:

You may cause more trouble by refusing a bribe than by accepting it. Had not a Minister of State said, albeit in an unguarded, alcoholic moment, that the trouble was not in receiving bribes, but in failing to do the thing for which the bribe was given? And if you refuse, how do you know that a 'brother' or a 'friend' is not receiving on your behalf, having told everyone that he is your agent? Stuff and nonsense! It was easy to keep one's hands clean. It required no more than the ability to say: 'I'm sorry, Mr. So-and-So, but I cannot continue this discussion. Good morning.' One should not, of course, be unduly arrogant. After all, the temptation was not really overwhelming. But in all modesty one could not say it had been non-existent [8].

When he was going to his village, the police stopped the lorry to take bribes. The driver said that without taking bribes they would not let them go. Gradually Obi became more familiar with the present condition of his country. He was shocked and thought about the solution:

'What an Augean stable!' he muttered to himself. 'Where does one begin? With the masses? Educate the masses?' He shook his head. 'Not a chance there. It would take centuries. A handful of men at the top. Or even one man with vision---an enlightened dictator. People are scared of the word nowadays. But what kind of democracy can exist side by side with so much corruption and ignorance? Perhaps a half-way house-a sort of

compromise.' When Obi's reasoning reached this point he reminded himself that England had been as corrupt not so very long ago [8].

Obi, in the words of Carroll, was somewhat like a black Englishman whose knowledge simply helped him understand the corruption of his society better than before [9]. However, Obi described the situation of his country and his people like a colonialist. The only difference was that he took into account the corruption of England too, though he saw it as somehow being a thing of past.

When Obi was charged with accepting a bribe, everybody was surprised and could not believe how an educated man like Obi could do such a shameful thing. Only the reader who is familiar with the details of Obi's life could understand why. One factor which helped this matter is the method of narration which is the third person. The incidents in the novel are described through Obi's eyes. We do not know what is going on in the minds of other characters. We only analyze the situation based on what we see from Obi's eyes. Among all these events, there is one thing that really makes us feel sorry. When the Umuofia Progressive Union gathered together to solve Obi's problem, they were not really angry about Obi's action. Actually they could not understand how an educated man like Obi did not know how to accept a bribe. In fact they considered accepting bribes as something ordinary. These people, who could not believe Obi's situation, said that it was impossible for an educated man to make such a mistake. They did not recognize that education was one of the important factors which caused Obi's corruption. His studies in literature changed his mind about the values of his country. After returning to Africa he tried to be useful and help his people, but he could not get along with them. Finally he lost everything he had and his life turned into the tragedy about which he was talking.

CONCLUSION

Living in a colony and studying European literature made Chinua Achebe aware of the tools which were used in colonizing African people. He has always tried to reveal how the colonized is defined by the ruling power and is deprived of his own rights in his own land. Education is an important system which helps colonists control the colonized by defining them as barbarians who need the rule of a master. *No Longer at Ease* shows how European education system encourages Africans to study through this system and inculcates his values in their minds. After studying in England,

Obi's values changed dramatically. Obi, the honest African student, leaned towards individualism and moved away from his traditional African worldview and life style. The contradiction between his new life-style and that of his country led to his corruption which was a sign of the victory of the white man's hegemony. Achebe believes that to fight against this hegemony, Africans should have their own education system and cultivate their own values.

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