

Cultural Confrontation and the Emergence of Ontogenesis of the Self in

Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract

'Ontogenesis of the self' implies a profound empirical formation of the 'self'. It is the result of the turbulent experience of one's urge for survival in a pluralistic world. The individual develops a social identity or a self-definition that includes how he/she conceptualizes the 'self'. The 'self' is broadly defined as the essential quality that makes a person distinct from the 'other'. Chinua Achebe, the legendary writer of Nigeria fictionalizes the traumatic experiences left behind by colonialism and its effect in individual's ontogenesis of self. The protagonist, Obi, in *No Longer at Ease* undergoes a lot of turmoil, including the doubt about the existence of identity, and at one stage it becomes more assertive, paving way for a likening towards self-assertion. The 'self' is the idea of a unified being which is the source of an idiosyncratic consciousness. It is also considered the agent responsible for the thoughts and actions of an individual. Obi's European upbringing renders him ignorant of certain native social modes, his transformation in accordance with the changing values puts him in a state of chaos. The present paper "Ontogenesis of the Self: An Interpretation of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*" tries to throw light on an urge of an individual's survival in hybrid society.

Keywords: Ontogenesis self, turmoil, consciousness, pluralistic world, self-assertion.

Chinua Achebe, the face of African literature, is with no doubt, a novelist of greater importance. His prolific career talks volumes about his competency as a writer. Though Achebe wrote novels predominantly for his own audience, his works gained him worldwide recognition and readership. The legacy of Achebe is best understood when people across the globe especially his own writers from Africa praised him greatly. With a clear perspective and remarkable insight, he projects the authentic picture of Africa. Exploring the human conditions, Achebe's novel attempt a spiritual search for arts and a rediscovery of Africa's past, they are but fictional chronicles of Africa and aspire to counter the complexes during the years of self-assertion. Achebe's first novel *Things Fall Apart* begins with one kind of certainty and ends with another. The assured tone of the precolonial Igbo village leader is replaced by the equally assured and unquestioning tone of the British District Commissioner. *No Longer at Ease* is, on the other hand begins and ends with questions. The novel begins with present, the protagonist Obi for his trial for bribery, and then works backward to tell how he arrived there. Obi grew up in the village of Umuofia, Nigeria. He had a happy childhood with his multiple siblings and parents. His father converted to Christianity, and his mother did so to appease him, but Obi was never very religious. He was very close to his mother.

As a young man, the Umuofia Progressive Union awarded him a scholarship to study in England. Before he leaves the country, everyone gave him a party, the village people give gift of money to Obi. "They pressed their presents into his palm, to buy a pencil with, or an exercise book, or a loaf of bread for the journey, a shilling there a penny there-substantial presents in a village where money was very rare, where men and women toiled from year to year to wrest a meagre living from an unwilling and exhausted soil"(10).

When Achebe introduces the second chapter, Obi immerses in other kinds of worlds- the English academic world and the urban world of Lagos. Achebe's comment on England's contribution seems ironic because "in England that Nigeria first became more than a name to him. That was the first great thing England did for him" (13). Obi has immersed in the English literary tradition and academic culture. While in England, his view of his home land is enclosed in the romantic form of Georgian pastoral poets. During his first winter in England he has written a nostalgic poem about Nigeria:

How sweet is to lie beneath a tree
At even time and share the ecstasy
Of jocund birds and flimsy butterflies;
How sweet to leave our earthbound body in its mud,
And rise towards the music of spheres,
Descending soft with the wind,
And the tender glow of the fading sun. (14)

Obi "recalled this poem and then turned and look at the rotting dog in the storm drain and smiled. 'I have tasted putrid flesh in the spoon', he said through clenched teeth. 'Far more apt'"(15). At this point, the readers are able to understand Obi's consciousness and his urge for developing ontogenesis self.

'Ontogenesis of the self' implies a profound empirical formation of the 'self'. It is the result of the turbulent experience of one's urge for survival in a pluralistic world. The individual develops a social identity or a self-definition that includes how he/she conceptualizes the 'self'. The 'self' is broadly defined as the essential quality that makes a person distinct from the 'other'. The 'self'

is the idea of a unified being which is the source of an idiosyncratic consciousness. It is also considered the agent responsible for the thoughts and actions of an individual.

Descartes is often considered as the first modern thinker to make a philosophical frame work for the natural sciences as the idea of 'self' began to develop. In the beginning Descartes arrives at a single principle i.e. 'thoughts exist'. In his *Discourse on the Method and Principles of Philosophy*, Descartes mentions that, "Thought cannot be separated from me; therefore, I exist. This is known as *cogito ergo sum* (I think, therefore I am). It means that, if one is skeptical of existence, that is in and itself a proof that one does exist" (4).

As many theorists observe, 'self' is programmed by one's gender, ethnicity, relationships, religion vocational and ideological affiliation and some attributes like homelessness, isolation and identity crisis. These entities are closely knitted to one's interpersonal world and form the triggering forces for the discovery and formulation of the self. In *No Longer at Ease*, Obi struggles between the contrasting and opposing attitudes of the British Club and Umuofia Progressive Unit. While encountering these cultural variations, many often, he remains passive but not tragic. For instance, in the Public Service Commission interview, Obi impresses the British chairman of the board. In the interview, while discussing English literature and literary theory, obi is fluent and articulate, alluding telling to Greene, Auden, Waugh and even to an elder from his village. Obi's definition of tragedy seems appropriate to his self:

'You think suicide ruins a tragedy' said the chairman.

'yes. Real tragedy is never resolved. It goes on hopelessly forever. Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies and feel a purging of 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'. (36)

Social psychologist Klein, critic Robert A. Baron in *Social Psychology* observes that “the self-concept is a special framework that influences how we process information about the social world around us along with information about ourselves such as our motives, emotional states, self-evaluation and abilities” (152-53). Considering this concept, one can understand that, it is Obi’s perception of himself reflected in his definition of tragedy. Here, Achebe conveys the message that, Obi encounters several cultural conflicts, but at same time, his rejection of suicide in the definition of tragedy readily conveys his character definition. In the words of critic C.L Innes in his book *Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature: Chinua Achebe*:

It is true that Obi’s definition applies more readily to this novel, although his dismissal of the ‘happy ending’ of *The Heart of Matter* has to be seen as clever rather than profound...Obi’s rejection of suicide as a proper ending for tragedy involves a rejection of *Things Fall Apart* as a tragic novel, and is perhaps Achebe’s means of reminding the reader of the separation between the novelist and the character he creates. (50)

Very early in one’s life, one develops a social identity, or a self-definition, that includes how one conceptualizes and evaluates oneself. For a person, just like Obi, this identity includes aspects such as one’s name and self concept, and aspects shared with others. One of the leading Danish philosophers, Soren Kierkegaard in his *The Sickness Unto Death* observes that “the self is a relation that relates itself to itself” (3). This carries with it the idea of a self as a process of understanding itself. A self has a certain consciousness of being a self. Humans contemplate their

place in the universe and the cosmos, and form a sense of identity, looking for meaning and trying to discover the purpose of their existence. However, the view of Kierkegaard is such that when one begins to ask ultimate questions, and contemplates existential issues of one's individuality and personhood, one can understand one's self. Kierkegaard further observes that "Most men live without ever becoming conscious of being destined as spirit – hence all the so-called security, contentment with life, etc., become desperate" (3).

An individual's self-consciousness never exists in isolation, that it always exists in relationship with an "other" or "others", who serve to validate its existence. In Obi's story, though it is chiefly set in Lagos, it is structured around a series of journeys. Each journey takes Obi as well as the reader to a deeper and more complex understanding of the culture. The first is his journey from Umuofia to Lagos; the second journey back from England to Lagos. The third and fourth journey are highly significant; the two trips back to Umuofia. The two trips back to Umuofia marks a significant change in Obi's self.

Another significant event of revealing Obi's Ontogenesis self is, the incident of his marriage proposal with Clara. Clara's reveals to Obi that, she is an *osu* meaning a member of a cursed family whose ancestor was given to gods. No clans find Clara as an acceptable choice for Obi to marry. But on the other hand, Obi did not give up Clara because in his view the clan has no right to interfere in his personal affairs. The postmodern idea of self-deals with the rejection of the hierarchical attitude of the colonial self by the colonized. There is no superior self or inferior self, but Obi values the individuality of the self. Obi tries to convince his parents that because he was a Christian, he would not consider about Clara's *osu* status. His mother however, told him firmly that he could only marry her after she died if he married her beforehand, she would kill herself. "If

you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself” (281).

Obi undergoes a sort of difficulties for being prejudice to Clara. As far as Obi is concerned, he is an ‘unheroic hero’ and recovers various sufferings. But on the other hand, Achebe, suggests that when the self undergoes a lot of turmoil, including the doubt about the existence of identity, it becomes more assertive, paving way for a likening towards self-assertion. It is true in the case of Clara, when she learns Obi’s parents do not accept an *osu*, she decided to call off the marriage. Unfortunately, she comes to know about her pregnancy, both Obi and Clara seek out an abortion for her. As abortion is a criminal act, they could only get a doctor who charges a high fee.

Obi leaves Clara to the hospital and became careless to his deed, but his self gets a deep hurt of his action and he searches Clara. But the female protagonist, Clara is a dynamite woman who cannot accept Obi no longer. Here, to explore the ‘self’, Achebe follows the conventions of ‘bildungsroman’. ‘Bildungsroman’ is a novel, which depicts the youth and maturing of a sensitive protagonist who makes an attempt to learn about the nature of the world, discover its meaning and pattern, and in doing so acquires a philosophy of life. This philosophy is animated by a concern for the whole man, unfolding organically in all his complexities and richness.

Successful ‘Bilding’ requires the existence of a social context that enables the person’s inner qualities to unfold and lead him/her from ignorance and innocence to wisdom and maturity. Quoting sociologist Peter Levin, critic Robert A. Baron in his *Social Psychology* says that “journey towards individual development and social integration may not be a smooth one, and, indeed, the relationship between the individual and the society, is usually marked by hostility and systematic disillusionments” (48).

Though Achebe portrays Clara as a dynamite woman, he questions the morality of both Obi and Clara. Quoting the words of critic C.L Innes in his book *Cambridge Studies in African and Caribbean Literature: Chinua Achebe*, “Neither Obi nor Clara considers the morality of abortion, and until it is too late, no other considerations than the cost and possible dangers to Clara are brought to the surface of Obi’s consciousness. The question of morality and illegality is raised by both doctors, but Obi does not reflect upon it. Achebe lets such reflection to his readers. Obi’s Western education is used to destroy life rather than save it. Neither Christian nor Igbo morality stops the abortion. But the death of Obi’s mother and the departure of Clara bring a new self image to Obi. Achebe wants to show that individual cannot escape from social responsibility without paying a terrible price. In a hybrid society, the individuals are confronted with multiple orders of morality, Obi’s failure to stop the abortion, acceptance of bribe and running away from responsibility are the fine examples of hybridity. Ache wants to show how cultural confrontation destroys identity, but the tragic sequences in the life of Obi and his realization inner consciousness develop his ontogenesis self.

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