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Education, Corruption, and Alienation: Postcolonial Dilemmas in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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ABSTRACT

Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960) dramatises the interweaving of corruption, alienation, and identity crisis within postcolonial Nigeria. Penned at the cusp of complete independence, the text interrogates the persistence of colonial legacies, foregrounding the dual vexation of Western education and the emergent elite's social burdens, which conspire to produce moral compromise and cultural dispossession. Achebe, through the tragic trajectory of Obi Okonkwo, offers a blistering critique of the moral rot and systemic malaise that still besiege a society marked by colonial subjugation. Obi's Metropolitan schooling instils a creased ideal of probity and civic duty. However, that ideal unravels beneath the compounding stresses of accrued indebtedness, familial demands, and the pervading venality inscribed within the national civil apparatus. Scholarly valuations—Kanak Raj Chandna, Surekha Ahlawat— foreground corruption as a pervasive social malignancy; Anindita Das inscribes it within the broader frame of postcolonial hegemony; Seyed Mohammad Marandi and Reyhane Shadpour reinscribe education as a residual ideological technology of empire; Abdul Hameed Abubakar frames alienation and rootlessness as objectively conjoined to the incomplete project of hybridity. This article, synthesising the pluralities, contends that the text apprehends corruption less as an isolated vice of the singular conscience than as a national contretemps whose ambience afflicts Nigeria's tentative and still unfulfilled transit into independent sovereignty.

Keywords: *Post-colonialism, Corruption, Alienation, Identity Crisis, Hegemony*

FULL PAPER

Chinua Achebe occupies a seminal position in African literature as the writer who redefined the cultural and political role of the African novel in the twentieth century. Often hailed as "the cultural ambassador of Africa" (Abubakar 17), Achebe sought to dismantle colonial misrepresentations of Africa and to assert an African-centred narrative voice. His second novel, *No Longer at Ease* (1960), stands at a pivotal historical moment: the year of Nigeria's independence from British rule. Unlike his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which traced the disintegration of Igbo society under the initial onslaught of colonialism, *No Longer at Ease* scrutinises the dilemmas of the first generation of Western-educated Africans who entered into civil service at the dawn of independence.

The novel opens with its protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, already on trial for bribery, thereby setting the tone for a narrative structured by irony and disillusionment. As the grandson of Okonkwo from *Things Fall Apart*, Obi embodies the expectations of a community that has invested in his education abroad. However, Obi's training at the London School of Economics—held in the novel as the emblem of a redemptive Anglophone education—collides violently with Lagos's entrenched social order, in which graft, familial patronage, and systemic brigandage have become routine. Achebe renders him at once emblematic and persuasive in his aspiration to transfigure the system from within. However, the narrative inexorably records the moment that his latent repugnance becomes the principle through which he plays the very game he professes to despise. The work's tragic irony rests not in the moral fragility of the singular individual but in the way that the individual's capitulation renders visible the broader default of a nation unable to integrate the remainders of colonial rule with yet unfixed imaginative horizons of independence.

Critical interpretations to date have mined the novel's discursive and narrative vectors with near-ubiquitous emphasis upon corruption as keystone. Chandna and Ahlawat detect in Achebe a double overlay that renders individual and collective moral decrepitude as reciprocally generative in Nigeria's postcolonial malaise. Das, meanwhile, identifies the postcolonial inflexion of the malaise by aligning Obi's administrative sink with an impersonal cultural hegemony borne from colonial pedagogy and bureaucracy. Marandi and Shadpour further develop the inflexion by establishing that metropolitan education appears in the text as an ideology of dislocating interiority, instilling a perplexing hybridisation of cultural memory and external imposition. Rounding the interpretive circuitry, Abubakar succinctly captures the whole as he traces the uncertainty of a figure suspended between ancestral mandates and indefinite futurity, the postcolonial youth illustrative of a social space unable to grant either form of coherence. Within this framework, Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* embodies a compact allegory of Nigeria's emergence from colonial tutelage, wherein the vanquishment of foreign dominion is exchanged for a more insidious entropy—moral decay and administrative atrophy. Obi's struggle to harmonise the legacy of Igbo ethical principles, his British training, and the venal apparatus of the state magnifies the larger anxieties that beset a historical cohort. Accordingly, this

study consolidates critical scholarship to demonstrate that the text frames corruption simultane-ously as a memento of empire and as the unfortunate inheritance of the independent polity.

Literature Review

Criticism of Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* has consolidated around a tripartite thematic axis—corruption, identity, and postcolonial alienation—each axis serving both as a fulcrum for discursive inquiry and as a lens through which the triangulation of thematic and narrative strategy becomes visible. Readers, commentators, and theorists alike interrogate the modalities whereby the hero, Obi Okonkwo, personifies the antagonistic expectations demanded by an emergent state. This subsection maps seminal readings that, individually and cumulatively, elucidate the dialectical interplay of formal Western education, patrimonial graft, and psychic displacement that the text renders, at once, a prosaic prophecy and an ethical indictment.

Corruption as Personal and Social Reality

Kanak Raj Chandna and Surekha Ahlawat furnish a detailed analysis of corruption as the cardinal thematic concern of the novel. Their inquiry establishes that Achebe portrays corruption not merely as an external social contagion but as an internal moral rupture that progressively debilitates Obi's initial idealism. The plot opens with Obi in the dock on a bribery charge, thereby framing corruption as a simultaneous legal and ethical quandary. Chandna and Ahlawat contend that Achebe elucidates how colonial misgovernance bequeathed a culture of venality that endured in the emergent postcolonial republic, wherein systemic graft was entrenched and, indeed, legitimised. Obi's eventual collapse, they maintain, arises not from isolated moral lapse but rather from an all-pervasive civil decay that also preys upon the best-educated and most utopian generations (Chandna and Ahlawat 215–20). Their analysis demonstrates how Achebe integrates personal corruption with collective complicity, illustrating how family, clan, and bureaucracy all contribute to sustaining a culture of bribery.

Corruption as Colonial Inheritance

Building on this theme, Anindita Das situates *No Longer at Ease* within a postcolonial critique of hegemony. She stresses that corruption in the novel cannot be divorced from the lingering influence of colonial structures. The European model of governance, she argues, fostered a system in which Nigerians aspired to the material lifestyles of their colonial rulers, thereby internalising a culture of exploitation. Obi, as an educated Nigerian, initially positions himself against bribery, yet he is gradually compelled to conform due to financial and familial pressures. Das emphasises how Achebe illustrates the psychological effects of colonialism: Nigerians inherit a sense of inferiority and a distorted hierarchy of values, which perpetuate corruption after independence. She concludes that Obi's tragedy reflects the broader postcolonial condition in which the educated elite, caught between tradition and modernity, become complicit in the very practices they sought to eradicate (Das 509–13).

Education as an Ideological Instrument

Seyed Mohammad Marandi and Reyhane Shadpour adopt a more theoretical approach, drawing on Louis Althusser's concept of ideological state apparatuses to argue that education in *No Longer at Ease* functions as a subtle but powerful colonial instrument. According to their reading, Western education in Nigeria instilled European values and individualism at the expense of indigenous traditions. Obi, having studied in England, returns with lofty ideals of honesty and reform but simultaneously alienates himself from the cultural practices of his community. Marandi and Shadpour argue that this alienation is not incidental but a direct consequence of education designed to produce compliant subjects of colonial power. Achebe's portrayal of Obi's disillusionment demonstrates how colonial education deprived Nigerians of cultural confidence while exposing them to moral dilemmas they could not resolve. The scholars highlight that Obi's eventual turn to bribery signifies not only personal collapse but the triumph of colonial hegemony over indigenous identity (Marandi and Shadpour 938–44).

Alienation and Rootlessness

Abdul Hamid Abubakar expands the interpretation of *No Longer at Ease* by framing it as an exposition of rootlessness conditioned by colonial dislocations. He discerns in Obi the allegorical figure of the postcolonial Nigerian youth who, having assimilated Western learning in the metropole, finds the homecoming landscape irrevocably altered. The protagonist, Abubakar, contends that he exists in a state of dialectical estrangement: the traditional ethical and cosmogonic orders of the community repel him, whilst the Enlightenment illusions adopted during formal study yield no ontological moorings in the moment of return. Cueing Achebe into Eliot, the scholar construes the titular clause as a metonym for Obi's cultural homelessness, a condition wherein ancestral inheritances and technocratic, rational statecraft exact mutually exclusive loyalties. This interstitial space precipitates, in narrative terms, the refusal of the marriage to Clara—foretold as an ontological yet class-inflected oscillator—together with the schism imputed to the civil and personal compromises that bracket him. Abubakar thus argues that Achebe, in circumscribing the hero's plight, records not merely an individual malaise but the broadly symbolic condition of a generation adrift, suspended in the agonistic gravity of two worlds incapable of conferring whole habitation (Abubakar 17–19).

Synthesis of Critical Perspectives

Collectively, these analyses underscore the variegated yet coherent interpretive trajectories inaugurated by Achebe's text. Chandna and Ahlawat construe corruption as the novel's axial theme, a judgment whose force is reinforced by Das's genealogical placement of malfeasance within undisciplined colonial inheritances. In a complementary gesture, Marandi and Shadpour interrogate the ideological apparatus of schooling, revealing how the practices of 'enlightenment' reproduce, rather than transcend, imperial legacies. Abubakar, in turn, dissects the resultant psychic grammar of the Berra man, where alienation and rootlessness become perceptual horizons of the

neo-Nigerian subject. The interpretive nodes thus cohere around the insight that Achebe's novel is no binarised morality yet a finely calibrated investigation of postcolonial discontents. Obi's axial rupture epitomises the collapse of individual integrity beneath the coiling demands of the structural, the curriculum of release transmogrifying into an apparatus of binding, and the uneasy coexistence of ruptured cultural registers dislodging the subject from a stabilised ontological ground.

Critical Analysis: Corruption as Personal and Social Decay

Achebe anchors his indictment of corruption in the figure of Obi Okonkwo, treating the protagonist not as an isolated sinner but as the emblematic product of a social order in deep moral decay. The opening trial, far from serving a purely judicial function, frames the novel as a court of conscience in which the private misdemeanour of a young expatriate is elevated to a symptom of collective malaise. The proceedings, therefore, invoke the broader structure of graft, expected as a rite of passage in Obi's personal life and yet a social contract in the nation at large. The presiding magistrate and the spectators alike, caught in the nexus of petty accommodation, do not abscribe the guilt of corrupt bargain exclusively to Obi; instead, they inscribe in his singular failure the indelible trace of an entire polity that has traded moral capital for the currency of paltry gain. Achebe's decision to start with Obi's conviction underscores the inevitability of his downfall, thereby shifting attention from the question of "what happened" to "why it happened." Achebe demonstrates that corruption in Nigeria after independence is not simply a new phenomenon but a continuation of colonial structures. Obi enters civil service determined to remain incorruptible, even voicing the belief that only the younger generation of university-trained Nigerians could cleanse the bureaucracy: "The public service of Nigeria would remain corrupt until the old Africans at the top were replaced by young men from the universities" (Achebe 31). His conviction in the power of education initially frames him as a reformer, but his disillusionment grows when he encounters systemic dishonesty entrenched at every level.

The pressures Obi faces—loan repayments to the Umuofia Progressive Union, the financial burden of supporting his family, and the expenses of a modern urban life—create conditions that make resistance to corruption nearly impossible. Chandna and Ahlawat argue that Obi's moral decline illustrates how corruption becomes normalised through both social expectation and economic necessity (215). The Umuofia Progressive Union, which funded Obi's education, symbolises this paradox: while it celebrates his achievement, it also places obligations on him that drive him deeper into debt and vulnerability. Obi's acceptance of bribes therefore emerges as a symptom of structural pressures rather than mere personal greed.

Achebe's depiction of bribery is also deeply ironic. In some cases, refusing a bribe generates more trouble than accepting it. Obi reflects at one point that "you may cause more trouble by refusing a bribe than by accepting it" (Achebe 98). This paradox underscores how corruption has become deeply ingrained in the fabric of Nigerian civil life. By the time Obi succumbs, he no longer perceives bribery as an extraordinary act but as an ordinary way of survival. In this way, Achebe demonstrates that

corruption in postcolonial Nigeria extends beyond morality and becomes an institutionalised habit.

Education as Colonial Ideology

A second critical dimension of Achebe's novel is the representation of education as an ideological instrument of colonial domination. Obi's tragedy cannot be understood without reference to his English education, which simultaneously equips him with ideals and estranges him from his cultural roots. Obi embodies the paradox of colonial education: he returns from England with lofty principles, yet these very ideals leave him ill-prepared for the compromises demanded by his society. Marandi and Shadpour argue that Western education serves as an ideological state apparatus, shaping colonised subjects to internalise European values (938). Obi's commitment to honesty and service is not only a personal conviction but also the product of his British schooling, which instilled abstract ideals divorced from Nigerian realities. In London, Obi even writes poems glorifying his homeland as an idyllic paradise, only to be shocked upon his return by the poverty and corruption of Lagos. The gap between his imagined Nigeria and the real Nigeria reflects the dissonance produced by colonial education, which distances subjects from the complexity of their lived environment. Achebe dramatises this alienation in Obi's first speech to the Umuofia Progressive Union upon his return. Dressed in shirtsleeves rather than formal attire, Obi extols education as service to the nation rather than a route to personal comfort: "Education for service, not for white-collar jobs and comfortable salaries. With our great country on the threshold of Independence, we need men who are prepared to serve her well and truly" (Achebe 29). His words, though sincere, alienate him from his audience, who expected the prestige of European mannerisms and language. This moment illustrates how colonial education creates a cultural divide not only between the coloniser and the colonised but also within the colonised community itself.

Moreover, Obi's inability to resolve his financial burdens reflects the limits of education as a means of liberation. The Union that funded his studies did so with the expectation of repayment, effectively commodifying his education and transforming it into a debt trap. Marandi and Shadpour note that such an education does not produce critical agency but cultivates compliance with colonial structures of hierarchy (941). Obi's eventual collapse into bribery underscores this contradiction: the very education that was supposed to elevate him into a modern elite becomes the means of his moral undoing.

Alienation and the Crisis of Identity

The third central theme that emerges in Achebe's narrative is alienation, a product of both colonial education and postcolonial disillusionment. Obi is depicted as a man "no longer at ease," caught between the traditions of his Igbo heritage and the modernity of his colonial education. This cultural homelessness manifests in nearly every aspect of his life. Obi's love for Clara, an Osu or outcast, dramatises the persistence of traditional restrictions that his modern ideals cannot overcome. He

insists on marrying Clara despite his parents' opposition, believing that his education and Christianity should have emancipated him from such customs. However, his father warns him that "Osu is like leprosy in the minds of our people" (Achebe 121). His mother's emotional blackmail—threatening suicide if he marries Clara—further isolates Obi, leaving him torn between filial duty and personal desire. Abubakar interprets this conflict as emblematic of postcolonial youth alienated from both tradition and modernity, unable to reconcile the two worlds (18). Clara herself eventually terminates the relationship, reinforcing Obi's rootlessness. Obi's alienation is further accentuated by his estrangement from both his community and his colonial superiors. Mr. Green, his European boss, embodies the colonial mindset that views Africans as inherently corrupt and incapable of self-governance. For Green, Obi's eventual acceptance of bribes confirms his prejudice. Das notes that such colonial attitudes perpetuate stereotypes of African incapacity, ensuring that Nigerians remain trapped in a cycle of dependency and inferiority (512). Thus, Obi's alienation is twofold: he is rejected by his own community for embracing modernity and simultaneously dismissed by Europeans as evidence of African backwardness.

Achebe encapsulates Obi's alienation in his narrative structure. By beginning the story with Obi's trial and narrating his fall through flashbacks, Achebe positions his protagonist as a man doomed from the start, unable to belong fully in either world. The symbolism of the novel's title, drawn from T. S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*, resonates here: Obi is perpetually unsettled, a stranger in both his inherited culture and his adopted ideals. Abubakar rightly observes that Obi's "abortive effort at education and culture…had deprived him of his links with his own people" (18). His alienation is not only personal but generational, reflecting the fate of many postcolonial elites who found themselves dislocated from both ancestral traditions and modern aspirations. Achebe narratively entwines the motifs of corruption, education, and alienation, rendering the postcolonial Nigerian predicament in the travails of Obi Okonkwo. Far from peripheral anomalies, corruption is revealed to be a vast, almost inevitable mesh, woven from structural imperatives and the tacit acquiescence of a society still negotiating the inheritance of colonial domination. The educational institution, officially the site of liberation, in truth perpetuates colonial scripts; it transmits maxims of competence and progress while excising the lived knowledge of the community, thereby informing the mind but dislocating the self. Alienation, in this calculus, is not incidental. However, the inevitable margin produced when the biome of tradition and the alien philosophy of formal enlightenment collide, leaving Obi and others adrift in a land whose languages and loyalties no longer accord a home.

Obi's misfortunes are chronicled in a manner that both compact and colonise Nigerian infrastructures and interpersonal contradictions, sardonically underlining that no intimate failure can be of exclusively private scale when the polity itself is a mosaic of fragility. Achebe deliberately monitors the protagonist from imperial sanitisation to a diagnosis of unhealed Victorian illnesses, compelling the reader to concede that individual intemperance is the manifestation of an elsewhere the entire society is unwilling to cure. The tale thus does not permit pity; instead, it invites

forewarning, for the fragility of formal liberation is never the moot of empty rhetoric but the strain for whose resolution nation-formation is perpetually deferred, repair and renewal are thrown. The failure of a single civil servant transmits, semaphore-like, the statement that unresolved dialectical rivalry—between chatter of museumified ordinances, recumbent colonial bric-a-bric and gropings towards authentic national animation—ultimately sanctions corruption to flourish and collective grief to proliferate.

Conclusion

Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* remains one of the most incisive examinations of the moral and cultural dislocations that marked Nigeria's passage from colonial tutelage to the uncertain horizon of self-rule. Through the arc of Obi Okonkwo's derailing, the novel juxtaposes aspiration with the slow-corrosive poisons of corruption, educational disillusion, and alienation, thus furnishing a concrete Nigerian tableau that, nonetheless, gestures across the South and across the globe. Achebe makes clear that venality is not merely the failing of a handful of persons but a revealing of the body politic's wounds, wounds inherited from colonial infrastructures and sutured only by the venality of newly minted elites.

Obi's tragic affliction is not moral turpitude but a moral incapacity; the weight of social expectation and familial allegiance is a more formidable adversary than the sum of the bribes he is taught to tolerate. He is famously (and anxiously) new, a verifiable product of the colonial missionary-school system who speaks with the polished idiom of scholarship. In the first, tentative seconds of the narrative, he is seen tending the vestiges of youthful integrity; at the first pegged horizon of future reform, he is seized. The traits that mark the high achiever, the attentive abroad, the dutiful open-eyed one, successively twist into hindrances, consumed by a Nigeria that reserves absolution only for apostasy. The metamorphosis is quiet and chilling; none of the alterations, by the terms of external rational expectation, seems irreversible. The novel portrays an irreversible moral decline, embodying a determinism that forecloses the possibility of renewed colonialism. As Chandna and Ahlawat argue, Obi's moral failure mirrors the broader collapse of values in postcolonial Nigeria, where the institutionalisation of corruption erodes both individual and collective ideals (217). His acceptance of bribes, therefore, must be understood not as an isolated act but as a reflection of a society struggling with its own fractured identity.

At the same time, Achebe critiques education as an ideological instrument that deepens alienation rather than resolves it. Obi's English education fosters ideals that estrange him from his community and render him unprepared for the realities of Nigerian life. Marandi and Shadpour rightly observe that colonial education functioned as a form of cultural indoctrination, producing subjects who were disconnected from their traditions while being judged inadequate by colonial standards (940). Obi's alienation, intensified by his doomed relationship with Clara and his estrangement from both his family and his colonial superiors, exemplifies the psychological costs of this hybridity. Achebe presents Obi as a generational figure—one who symbolises the dilemmas of a nation caught between colonial inheritance and

postcolonial aspirations. As Abubakar notes, Obi's cultural homelessness makes him a representative of the alienated youth of postcolonial Africa (18). The novel thus resonates far beyond its historical setting, speaking to the enduring challenges of governance, identity, and morality in societies that have grappled with the aftermath of colonialism. Achebe's achievement lies in his refusal to present simplistic solutions. Rather than offering Obi as a martyr or a villain, Achebe portrays him as a flawed but emblematic character whose life dramatises the fragility of independence. As Das emphasises, the novel captures the hegemony of colonial influence while revealing the tragic irony of a nation that had hoped for renewal but found itself ensnared in the same structures of corruption (510). In this sense, *No Longer at Ease* is less a story of one man's fall than a parable of an entire nation's disillusionment. By weaving together the themes of corruption, education, and alienation, Achebe compels readers to confront the contradictions at the heart of postcolonial societies. His novel continues to speak powerfully to contemporary debates about leadership, integrity, and cultural identity in Africa and beyond. In Obi's downfall, we see not only the personal tragedy of a young man but also the moral crisis of a nation that, even at the dawn of independence, was already "no longer at ease."

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