

An Analysis of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* in the light of Aimé Césaire's Discourse on Colonialism

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Abstract: Achebe's novels on colonialism *No Longer at Ease* explore the encounter between the British colonizer and the African colonized in the period of Nigerian independence in the 1960s. This novel has been examined from postcolonial perspective by various critics. However, little attention has been paid to the usage of the postcolonial African seminal voices like Aimé Césaire in examining Achebe's work. This research will make an attempt to fill in that gap in the area of Achebe scholarship. I have read Aimé Césaire's *Discourse on Colonialism* and I have applied his observations to see how far Achebe agrees and disagrees with Césaire in his novel. At the end, I have been able to conclude that Achebe agrees with Césaire that colonizers justified violence in the name of civilizing the blacks. Religion and educational ideologies and hegemony are avenues to tear apart the pre-colonial judicial and cooperative Igbo society and the psyches of Africans are ravaged to such an extent that they adopt mimicry.

Keywords: *Colonizer, Colonized, Mimicry, Post colonialism, Eurocentric, Colonialism*

Aimé Césaire (26 June 1913 – 17 April 2008) was a Martinique born writer, poet and politician. As a result of the atrocities of the French rule in Martinique, he detested colonialism. He is known for his strong indictment on colonialism in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950).

Firstly, colonialism to Césaire in *Discourse on Colonialism* (1950) is not evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise or a project to glorify God or to extend the rule of Law (p. 32). What is colonialism then? Césaire answers this by showing the different colonial barbaric strategies in his writing. At that time not only the Harlem Renaissance was taking place in the United States of America but also the Surrealist artists were

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An Analysis of Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease in the light of Aimé Césaire's Discourse on Colonialism

calling for the overthrow of French colonial rule and his birth place Martinique was under the oppressive regime of French sovereignty. As pointed by Césaire:

Between colonizer and colonized there is room only for forced labor, intimidation, pressure, the police, taxation, theft, rape, compulsory crops, contempt, mistrust, arrogance, self-complacency, swinishness, brainless elites, degraded masses. (p. 42)

To Césaire, colonization is an aggressive process where non-westerners become non-entities and they are treated like animals by brutal colonizers. For Césaire, colonization leads to:

No human contact, but relations of domination and submission which turn the man into a class-room monitor, an army sergeant, a prison guard, a slave driver, and the indigenous man into an instrument of production. (p. 42)

As it is, colonizers being at the centre of power relegate the colonized to the background position of the subaltern. In fact, Césaire provides several credible examples to illustrate the inhuman massacre carried out by the Europeans on the East. Occidental forces had not only sacrificed thousands of men to the Congo-Ocean (p. 43) but also caused several other damages like “food crops destroyed, malnutrition permanently introduced, agricultural development oriented solely toward the benefit of the metropolitan countries, about the looting of products, the looting of raw materials” (p. 43). Added to these, Europeans killed ninety thousand inhabitants of Madagascar and Indochina. They cry “kill! kill!” and “Let’s see some blood” (p. 49) and so they destroyed the Indian civilization along with the imprisonment in Black Africa and crack down in the West Indies. Through such examples, Césaire highlights the cruelty unleashed during the period of colonialism. He states an equation: “colonization = thing-ification” (p. 42) as Africans and those in the Caribbean become objects at the mercy of the Europeans.

It is mainly his life in Martinique that made him realize what colonialism did to the psyche of the coloured people. He comments in his interview with René Depestre (2010):

We lived in an atmosphere of rejection, and we developed an inferiority complex. I have always thought that the black man was searching for his identity. And it has seemed to me that if what we want is to establish this identity, then we must have a concrete consciousness of what we are - that is, of the first fact of our lives: that we are black. (p. 91)

Secondly, Césaire rejects the Eurocentric gaze which associates East with savagery, backwardness, meanness, inferiority and wickedness. The dishonest equation “Christianity=civilization, paganism=savagery” (p. 33) is the creation of abominable racist colonialists whose victims were the Indians, the yellow people, and the Negroes. Césaire looks down upon all the humanitarian approaches of the non-Africans and proclaims that the talk about progress, achievements, diseases cured, improved standards of living (p. 42) are completely false. “The idea of the barbaric Negro is a European invention” (p.53) he asserts. He refutes the flawed ideas of whites. Césaire refers to the misconception which is apparent in Ernest Renan who supported the widening of inequalities between the colonizer and the colonized and making it into a law (cited in Césaire, 1950, p. 37).

Also, the ideas of Dominique Octave Mannoni, Gobineau and Roger Caillois show the flawed western gaze. Mannoni provides psychoanalytic interpretation and says that the famous brutalities people talk about have been very greatly exaggerated, that it is all neurotic fabrication, that the tortures were imaginary tortures applied by imaginary executioners (cited in Césaire, 1950, p. 61). Gobineau says “the only history is white” and Caillois observes that compared to the cannibals, the dismemberers, and other lesser breeds, Europe and the West are the incarnation of respect for human dignity (cited in Césaire, 1950, p.70). Césaire repudiates such colonial discourse which negates the ethnography of the east. For him, colonizers should respect the culture of the subjugated blacks and if they are in Congo they should respect as well as recognize the full human value of the Bantu philosophy (p. 58).

He talks about how he along with Senegalese Leopold Senghor whom he met in Paris and his childhood friend Guianan Léon Damas gave birth of the *negre*, a term of defiance which eventually gave rise to the *Négritude* movement in the 1930s to dismiss all untrue occidental ideals. Recovering the history of Africa’s accomplishments (Kelley, 1972, p. 21) is the objective of *Négritude*. As reported by Césaire:

Europeans despised everything about Africa, and in France people spoke of a civilized world and a barbarian world. The barbarian world was Africa, and the civilized world was Europe. Therefore the best thing one could do with an African was to assimilate him: the ideal was to turn him into a Frenchman with black skin. (Depestre, 2010, p. 88)

An Analysis of Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease in the light of Aimé Césaire's Discourse on Colonialism

Césaire thinks that Negroes were not, as Europeans put it, born yesterday, because there have been beautiful and important black civilizations (Depestre, 2010, 92). During Césaire's time, Europeans wrote history of world civilization without devoting a single chapter to Africa, as if Africa had made no contributions to the world. With the belief that Africa was not some sort of blank page in the history of humanity, Césaire with Senghor and others claimed that Negro heritage was worthy of respect and pride (Depestre, 2010, 92). He seeks Africans to decolonize their minds from such fallacious thoughts of uncivilized Europeans.

Thirdly, he focuses on the negative relationship between the colonizer and the colonized. "No one colonizes innocently and a civilization that justifies colonization is a morally diseased sick civilization" (p. 39) says Césaire. He tells that "between colonization and civilization there is an infinite distance... there could not come a single human value" (p. 34). Speaking about millions of Africans within whose heart fear has been cunningly instilled, who have been taught to have an inferiority complex, to tremble, kneel, despair, and behave like flunkies (p. 43), Césaire discusses the psychological turmoil within these people. Millions of men were torn from their gods, their land and their wisdom (p.43) and the Chinese, Moslems and other races were also massacred. To be specific, he asserts that colonization cannot be justified in any way.

Fourthly, in *Discourse* he appreciates the pre-colonial societies. Previously he glorified the kind, respectful Africans as people, who could build houses, govern empires and cultivate fields (cited in Kelley, 1972, p. 7). Here, he holds in high regard the communal, democratic, cooperative, anti-capitalist, ante-capitalist, fraternal (p. 44) and courteous (p. 51) pre-colonial African societies and advises Africans to create a new society with the help of all their brother slaves, a society rich with all the productive power of modern times, warm with all the fraternity of olden days (p. 52). This manifests the dream of Césaire who desires all the Africans of this world to live harmoniously together.

Finally, he uses the example of Hitler. Taking the idea of Hitler from Du Bois's *The World and Africa* that draws a parallel between the cruelty of Hitler and that of Great Britain and France (cited in Kelley, 1972, pp. 20-21), Césaire further responds saying that the West accomplices Nazism and Fascism till it began to inflict on themselves (p. 36). Hitler has killed white man and he has applied to Europe colonialist procedures which until then have been only reserved exclusively for the Arabs of Algeria, the coolies of India and the niggers of Africa (p. 36). He affirms that USA is the barbaric force (p. 47). Building solidarity among blacks

who were doubly proletarianized and alienated: in the first place as workers, and then also as blacks (Depestre, 2010, 94) is Césaire's goal. It is his belief that the proletariats of this world must fight against the bourgeoisie and Joe Stalin's government will fulfil his dream. However, his dream is unrealistic as it fails to bring democracy later on. Leftist and communist Césaire joined French National Assembly for Martinique. But, in 1956, after the Soviet Union's suppression of the Hungarian revolution, Césaire resigned from the French Communist Party (FCP) and he himself understood that the Marxist dream of fraternity is a mare's nest.

The Négritude movement has been studied by various critics. Some critics have drawn the differences between Senghor and Césaire. McLeod (2007) draws similarities between them as both aimed at the dynamic synthesis of all cultures to promote "universal emancipation" (p. 81). Likewise, Reiland Rabaka (2011) remarks that similar to Césairean Négritude, Senghorian Négritude advocated a critical return to the pre-colonial African past. Unlike Césaire, Senghor's work consistently exhibited an intense preoccupation with French philosophy and culture (p. 173). Whereas Césairean Négritude can best be characterized by its emphasis on African history and culture; and the struggle of African masses, Senghor's ideas of Négritude is best captured with the words like assimilation, synthesis, symbiosis, pseudo-African socialism and intellectual elitism (p.173). Coupled with these, Feminists have criticized Négritude as it has a masculine representation of blackness assuming that African women do not need liberation as they are free (cited in McLeod, p. 83).

Chinua Achebe

In "Chinua Achebe and the Invention of African Literature" (1996) Simon Gikandi acclaims Chinua Achebe as the writer who "invented African literature" (p. ix). Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) was born in Eastern Nigeria as Albert Chinualumogu. Achebe's childhood is notable because his father was a converted Christian but his other family members used to follow traditional African Igbo religion. He reveals that the two cultures of his childhood gave him advantages as a writer as he was moved by the poetry of Christianity as well as the thing that Christianity was attempting to suppress: the traditional religion (Rowell, 1990, p. 101). During his childhood he used to side with the "smart and courageous" (Garner, 2015, p. 1) white explorers of his English books. Ibadan University was "the watershed, a turning point" (Rowell, 1990, p.101) where he found that he is one of those savages jumping up and down on the beach (cited in Gikandi, 1996, p. xvii) in texts like Joseph

An Analysis of Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease in the light of Aimé Césaire's Discourse on Colonialism

Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1902). That is why his role as a writer is to help his society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denigration and self-abasement (cited in Gikandi, 1996, p. xi). His intention is to indicate to his readers that Africans did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans (cited in Gikandi, 1996, p. xvii).

Achebe criticizes Joseph Conrad in "An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*" (1978) for his prejudiced representation of Africans in *Heart of Darkness* (1902). The projection of Africa as the "other world", the antithesis of Europe and therefore of civilization (p. 3) and the depiction of the bad Congo river with good Thames river (p. 3) is disapproved by Achebe. Africans are misrepresented in *Heart of Darkness* (1902) as they make "violent babble of uncouth sounds among themselves" (p. 6) in place of speech. On the grounds of such partial African image, Conrad is a thoroughgoing racist (p. 9) to Achebe.

No Longer at Ease (1960)

It dramatizes the life of Obi Okonkwo, Okonkwo's grandson in colonial Nigeria of 1950s. He has been taught the Christian religion from his birth. Sent to England to study with the scholarship of Umuofian Progressive Union, he loves Clara, an osu or outcast. The traditional life of *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is missing here as the urban society of Lagos is corrupted. While working in the Scholarship Board of Lagos, Obi is offered money by Mark, the brother of a girl who wants her sister to get scholarship. Upon rejection from him, the girl Elsie visits Obi only to offer her body to him which Obi declines. Neither his father nor his mother supports his decision to marry Clara. Even his mother threatens him that she will commit suicide if he marries her. Clara undergoes an abortion and leaves Obi. Matching up with the European materialistic lifestyle, his siblings' education coupled with the scholarship loan makes him take bribe and this finally leads to his imprisonment. Caught between the demands of two cultures, Obi fails to be a part of either.

Analysis

The Eurocentric belief that Christianity stands for civilization and paganism for barbarism which is discussed in *Discourse* (1950) finds expression in Obi's parents in *No Longer at Ease* (1960). Obi's father has espoused Christianity and he does not permit the heathen sacrifice of breaking of Kola nuts to idols in his house on the pretext that "this is a Christian house" (p. 41). He forbids his wife to practice orature in front of their children as they are the people of the church, not "heathens" (p.

46). Philip Rogers (1983) reinforces the fact that the word of white power portends black spiritual decay and death (p.166). Hannah acquiesces with her husband and even kills the sacred he-goat but the emasculation of the clan has been so extreme that she is not punished. She orders her children not to eat heathen food and in this way she creates the psychic and physical dislocation of Obi. Worse, Obi is not allowed to accept food in neighbouring houses unlike other African children who are free to eat wherever they like. Obi says “we don’t eat heathen food” (p. 47) as he is moulded from childhood to despise paganism. Rogers thinks that “the absence of cultural or religious values and emotional ties” (p.173) leads Obi to his downfall.

What is interesting to notice is the transformation of Obi after he goes to England. He is idealistic at first about Nigeria in England. His devotion towards Nigeria is unfolded as he writes about its “jocund birds and flimsy butterflies” (p.13) in England. To add to that, Obi after returning from England wants to eat Nigerian food and he is shocked by the noise, crowd, prostitutes or “brightly dressed girls” (p.12), electric lights and urbanization of Lagos. Obi uses pleasure car “Morris Oxford” (p. 53) and he keeps a house with servant Zacchaeus to retain his status in front of both cultures. At this point, he is embroiled in the corruption of Lagos.

His name is spelled backward to mean Ibo. This shows that Obi’s world is turned upside down. The epigraph of this novel traces the journey of the biblical tale of the three wise men of T. S. Eliot’s poem “The Gift of the Magi” who watch the birth of Jesus Christ. After returning to their native land, they are not happy for Christianity has ended the magical pagan world. In the writing of Babalola (1986):

The Biblical tale of three wise men clearly resembles Achebe’s narrative about an unlucky Nigerian (Igbo) scholar who returns home from England to find things contrary to expectation and the initial impulse behind his journey abroad. (p.142)

Comparably, Obi is not at ease in his double heritage. His sorrow in England that he has to speak English which is not his mother tongue in front of the British reflects the inferior position of Africans regarding their native language. Obi believes that speaking in English will give the whites the impression that Africans do not have rich language though in reality they have “great art of conversation” (p.40).

To Césaire, colonialism is neither evangelization, nor a philanthropic enterprise (*Discourse*, 1950, p. 32). This is true in the case of Isaac who has to retire on a pension of two pounds a month after nearly thirty years of church service and scandalously a good amount of this money went

An Analysis of Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease in the light of Aimé Césaire's Discourse on Colonialism

back to the same church by way of class fees and other contributions and his children have to pay school fees in addition to church fees. Obi in Lagos pays more electricity bills than while in England. When Obi decides to marry osu Clara Okeke, his hybrid Christian parents who believe in Igbo caste discrimination are against this alliance. As Isaac puts it:

Osu is like leprosy in the minds of our people. I beg of you, my son, not to bring the mark of shame and of leprosy into your family. If you do, your children and your children's children unto the third and fourth generations will curse your memory. It is not for myself I speak; my days are few. You will bring sorrow on your head and on the heads of your children. Who will marry your daughters? Whose daughters will your sons marry? Think of that, my son. (p.107)

His mother Hannah is against marrying Clara and she threatens “But if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself” (p.108). As per her belief, her dream of white cloth bed which is eaten by a swarm of white termites is a premonition of the destruction which will befall on them if Obi marries an osu. Now the previous image of the razor cut hand of his mother emerges as a powerful symbol of the blood ties between Hannah and Obi. Rogers (1983) states that the razor severs Obi both from his mother as well as his mother tongue (p.167) and she is therefore the victim of the white world, whose agent is her own son (p.176). Obi cannot transcend this bonding to marry Clara.

Obi wants to marry Clara but no one pays heed to Obi's standpoint- “what made an osu different from other men and women? Nothing but the ignorance of their forefathers. Why should they, who had seen the light of the Gospel, remain in that ignorance?” (p.107). His mother's disapproval of this osu marriage fuels up Obi's mental turbulence. This is a severe psychological crisis for hybrid second Nigerian generations like Obi who is not allowed to marry white woman and osu woman but he can take bribe and even sacrifice his religion, language and culture to rise up the social ladder. Rogers (1983) perceives that Obi's sound sleeping after his mother's death parallels with the Christ of “Easter Hymn” who is unresponsive towards human prayers (p.168). Although Obi does not read Bible in England, he argues for Clara in the terms of

Christianity which infers to his lack of identity. Ironically, the police who arrests Obi brings out the image of the District Commissioner who came to arrest his grandfather Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart* (1958). Contradictory to his name meaning “the mind at last is at rest” (p. 5), Obi is the victim of double society. Specifically, the Igbo society in *No Longer at Ease* (1960) is no more the happy *Things Fall Apart* (1958) communal society where the Igbo participated in wrestling matches, yam festivals and marriage rituals joyfully.

Africans are involved in crimes under the umbrella of British administration. At the outset of the novel civil servants pay as much as ten shillings and sixpence to obtain a doctor’s certificate of illness to be present in the day of Obi’s trial. Kola nuts are replaced by bribes to welcome visitors. Obi’s money is stolen and we can see that Igbo girls offer their bodies for scholarship. Policemen also accept bribes. Joshua Udo, a messenger in the post office has been sacked from job for sleeping on duty but in reality, he has been sacked as he could not give the bribe of ten pounds to higher Igbo post office officers.

The loss of communal bonding is visible in this modern Nigeria. Children leave their parents in villages in pursuit of wealth and it is found that no villagers can attend a wedding unless they have invitation cards. Although Obi’s finds it difficult to cope up with the “terrible” (p.134) bribe custom as he is morally isolated from dishonest means, he takes it to meet the demands of the double world of Nigeria which is on the brink of independence. Rogers (1983) speculates that the two halves of the palm Kernel represent the two halves of Obi’s “divided life” (p.176). Obi gets caught only when he has taken his last bribe. This is a warning for all Africans that there is no escape from the punishment of corruption.

On the whole, it can be seen that Achebe has fictionalized many ideas of Césaire. Christianity distances Obi of *No Longer at Ease* (1960) from his own religion and makes him suffer within a rootless Nigerian society. The pre-colonial democratic society of the Igbo has no communal ties in colonial Nigeria where Obi does not respect his clan’s decision of not marrying an outcast. Overall, the detrimental effects of colonialism on the colonized as pointed out by Césaire are shown in Achebe’s novel lucidly. This means that Césaire’s anti-colonial ideas are authentic representation of brutal colonialism in Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease* (1960).

An Analysis of Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease in the light of Aimé Césaire's Discourse on Colonialism

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