

Obi Okonkwo: A Mimic Man Troubled with Identity-Crisis in Cultural Hybridity (in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*)

Abstract

In 1950s Chinua Achebe was growing up as a writer when Nigeria was also recording huge growth as a nation. The successive decades saw him grow more and more mature and reading his country as an entity with its political, social, cultural, linguistic psychological and historical realities. In his second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, which was published in 1960, the year of Nigeria's independence and transition from a colonial to a post-colonial era, Achebe has explored the character of Obi Okonkwo, the protagonist, who in the face of hybridization of local culture is troubled with identity-crisis. True, in the colonial situation interactions between the colonizers and the colonized cause hybridization of culture and interpenetration of two different cultures creates an identity-crisis of the locals. Macaulay, in his "Minute on Indian Education" (1835) refers to such ambivalent locals as mimic men who would be interpreters between the rulers and the ruled. He believes that they will be Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, opinions, morals and intellect. This hybridization will create anxiety among the locals and it will guarantee the colonizers' political, economic and cultural endurance. This crisis of anxiety worsens when the locals, without sharing the common values and aspirations of the local tradition which is crucial to safeguard and protect self-identity, try to mimic the colonizers' culture and assume it as an ideal for projecting identity. In this paper my purpose is to show, in a theoretical format, how Obi Okonkwo in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* turns into Macaulay's mimic man¹ and how mimicry leads him to his identity-crisis.

Key words: Macaulay, mimic man, Africanism, indigeneity, hybridity

Lord Macaulay (1800-1859), a British historian and Whig politician, like a typical and biased colonial ruler held a conviction that the whole world was divided into civilization and barbarism and in his eyes, Britain represented the high point of civilization. While serving as a member of the supreme

council of the East India Company from 1834 to 1838, Macaulay made his advocacy of English-language education for Indian students in his *Minute* with a view to producing a class of interpreters, Indian in blood but English in taste. Though Macaulay's *Minute* targeted India as a field of the colonizers' mission of producing a generation equipped with English education, language and taste, Africa also encountered, from the very inception of the colonial enterprise, the British mission of introducing English as a lingua franca and producing a class of people who would serve as clerks, lower graded office assistants and interpreters. A good number of texts, belonging to the colonial literary canon, apparently echo Macaulay's mission of colonizing the minds of the natives. Many colonial writers carry on Macaulay's legacy of introducing mimicry through misinterpretations and misrepresentations of colonized. Rudyard Kipling has invited the rest of the world to take up the 'White Man's Burden'ⁱⁱ. Joseph Conrad has depicted Congo as primitive and savage in his *Heart of Darkness*. In "Shooting an Elephant" George Orwell's Burmese people are perplexing and upsettingⁱⁱⁱ. Hence, the colonizers and their texts are advocating the epic mission of producing mimic men by imposing their knowledge, language, taste and culture upon the natives. Colonizers with an ironical intention of going on with their civilizing mission produce a discourse or:

...a text rich in the traditions of *trompe l'oeil*, irony, mimicry, and repetition. In this comic turn from the high ideals of the colonial imagination to its low mimetic literary effects, mimicry emerges as one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge. (Bhabha 126)

This civilizing mission aims at imparting to the natives knowledge of the European language and culture of the colonial power and creating "Western-educated natives who were to collaborate with and act as the agents for the dissemination of colonial power and authority" (Azim 163). But this objective is proved elusive as the vehement resistance to the colonial power comes

from the Western-educated natives. Again, mimicry can be seen as an opportunistic mode of behaviour as it confuses the locals when they try to copy the colonial masters to have an access to their power by suppressing their own cultural identity. Crisis begins inevitably when the native culture gradually gets hybridized with that of colonizers.

Living in hybrid culture, a man mimicking Western pattern of life faces an intense identity-crisis and develops a sense of exile from his native land and it leads him to tension. Jean Paul Sartre in the preface to Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* has said that "The status of the native is a nervous condition introduced and maintained by settler among colonized people with their consent" (Sartre in Fanon iv). Tension emerges as the colonized, along with their sense of an inferior status, intend to share the privileges of the colonizers. And in an encounter with 'shared cultural commitments' they feel "that identity is a failure... the internalization of social norms (which sociologists theorise as something that happens smoothly and inexorably) always encounters resistance and ultimately does not work: we do not become who we are supposed to be" (Culler 116). Thus mimicry, a subversive potential, serves as a weapon for both the colonizers and the colonized, placing each against the other and posing threat for each. In this way, it serves as a double-edged weapon, wounding the natives by disregarding their cultural identity and at the same time creating resistance against the colonizers.

Every individual feels psychological and political pressure for identity and the term is usually defined by nationality, race, gender, sexual performance, language, class or religion. It is also demarcated by historical marginalization of an individual. But identity crisis becomes acute when it faces tensions and strife after falling into the juncture of two streams of hegemony. In the process of acquiring identity, language works as the first and foremost means which, according to Lacan, is "what follows being into

desire" (Eagleton 167-168). Language makes an approximation of sense of all objects and it takes the individual away from the real to an inaccessible world, severed from signification. Consequently, the individual, the child who learns language for the first time, hankers after substitute for the real and perceives his surrounding through metaphors and metonymy, projected by his language. Through an accumulating process language articulates historical consciousness in an individual and it leads him towards his tradition or root whose recognition requires a polemic. This polemic is articulated by metaphors and metonymy which are composed by signs and signifiers. These signs and signifiers formulate the consciousness of the individual's position in his society and enable him to defend his identity.

According to Lacan^{iv}, unconscious is structured like language and hence when a language is imposed upon an individual, his whole real world is substituted by a borrowed vocabulary. He names the signifieds around him with the signifiers imposed by the outsiders. But in the process of naming objects with new signifiers for new significations indigeneity poses as a counter force. In such a conflicting situation, the individual or the mimic man loses the balance and harmony of his self as he feels challenged by the borrowed vocabulary. In such a juncture a mimic man finds himself "within the struggle of psychic representation and social reality" (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 40). Then ambivalence takes him in the grip of cultural hybridity and gradually he turns into a failure.

Now, *No longer at Ease* depicts Obi Okonkwo, the protagonist, as a failure, split up in the crossroads of African and European cultures, an entity shattered between tradition and European ways. The novel was published in the year of Nigerian independence in 1960 when "the discourse of national identity was still seeking forms through which to express itself; ... the cultural and social pressures which young Nigerians encountered at the dawn of independence ..." (Gikandi 79). The novel produces a discourse,

giving details of the crises emerging out of interactions between tradition and European ways. Thus, *No Longer at Ease* turns into a literary narrative within its social and cultural context. When a literary text becomes a narrative of a discourse it must have some purposes behind it. Considering Obi Okonkwo's interaction with the factors which encounter him, it can be said that these purposes are mostly social, geared towards the contemporary social realities and an intensive exploration of the past, present and future with all their interacting factors is needed because they form the foundation of this text.

In fact, Achebe writes "from within the ambit of his ... own social and cultural experience..." (Syal 44). He has observed the clash between the local and the European cultures from a very close quarter. If closely examined, this clash takes place between:

...two familiar traditions in the discourse of identity: the philosophical tradition of identity as process of self reflection in the mirror of (human) nature; and the anthropological view of the difference of human identity as located in the division of Nature/Culture. (Bhabha, *Location of Culture* 46)

Colonialism produces an image of the locals which tends to dislocate them from their 'philosophical tradition of identity' saturated by their social, psychological and historical consciousness. But the local tradition which produces a counter discourse of colonial persistence inspires the locals to question the colonial representation. Thus, an intense clash begins and ends in the formation of cultural hybridity. This confronting situation leads the educated youths to a critical juncture which produces anxiety among them. European education tempts them to liberalism and casual disposition and the local tradition tends to hold them to the social realities and the root. Thus, the confluence of two opposite hegemonies forms anxiety which leads the young and Western-educated generation to a corrosive dualism and mars the indigeneity of life. Consequently, the generation of colonial mimic men

turns into a failure. Obi Okonkwo belongs to this generation of mimic men and *No Longer at Ease* depicts his predicament as a mimic man, split up in the dualism between appropriation and inappropriation.

No Longer at Ease begins with the predicament of Obi Okonkwo, standing in the dock, tears rolling down his cheeks, looking indifferent: "For three or four weeks Obi Okonkwo has been steeling himself against this moment and when he walked into the dock that morning he thought he was fully prepared. He wore a smart palm-beach suit and appeared unruffled and indifferent" (1). The Nigeria that Obi wanted to see after his return from England with a higher degree was now totally different. It was now a country, rapidly growing in the British colonial format. The spirit with which Obi cherished to purify his country from all its corruption, ultimately meets with disgraceful failure for his own involvement in a foul act of bribery. A very close realization of these truths which offer persisting question about his identity, forces his tears to fall. A realization of the futility of his resistance also makes him shed tears. Obi looks outwardly European. His education and close contact with the European culture and language have brought about only a superficial change in him. He can neither absorb the colonizers' culture fully nor compromise with his own culture. As a result, he feels helpless in his own culture and alienated in European culture. The binary oppositions between European attitude and African attitude or modernity and tradition have led Obi to tension and anxiety regarding his identity.

True, in the colonized countries European education serves as margin and local tradition as centre. Obi was sent to a mission school for receiving Western education. Afterwards, he was sent to Europe to study law. But he took up English literature frustrating the expectation of the Umuofian Progressive Union which granted him a scholarship for higher education. Actually, the Umuofian Progressive Union is body of African men and it

contributes to sponsor brilliant students that gain scholarship to study abroad. However, the Umuofian Progressive Union was at first unhappy with him but later consoled itself with the thought that he would at least occupy a position in the civil service. Initially, Obi demonstrated staunch patriotism. He also wrote a callow poem about Africa while studying in England. His love for Igbo is also remarkable. He feels that the old Africans should be replaced by the young and educated people for the revolutionary change, progress and prosperity of the country. He is determined to abolish corruption and preserve the consciousness of national identity. But out of frivolity, he possesses the spirit of a mimic man. His desire to marry Clara, an *Osu*¹, against the consent and vehement opposition of his parents, depicts his adherence to the conflicting European hegemony which makes him think casually and liberally, not according to his tradition. After his return, in the welcome ceremony his short sleeved casual shirt and simple English with 'is' and 'was' cast him out of the expectation of the members of the Umuofian Progressive Union. His ultimate failure to attend his mother's funeral depicts him to be a mimic man, lost in a cultural hybridity.

From the very beginning, Obi was consciously against colonial mentality. For example, when his friend Joseph criticised him for his arrogant reply to the question of the chairman of the interview board whether he wanted the job so that he could take bribe, Obi called him 'nonsense' and branded such attitude as 'colonial mentality':

'Why do you want a job in the civil service? So that you can take bribes? He asked. Obi hesitated. His first impulse was to say it was an idiotic question. He said instead: 'I don't know how you expect me to answer that question.

¹ *Osu* are a section of people whose ancestors were dedicated to the deities of Igbo. They are considered to be the properties of the gods. Hence, marital relationship and, in some cases, interactions with them is forbidden in Igbo culture.

Even if my reason is to take bribes, you don't expect me very useful question.' (32)

Obi's attitude towards such queries appears to be a kind of protest against colonialism. But at the same time such arrogance in presence of his boss seems to be a metaphorical protest against the Igbo god *Chi* and Joseph warns him: "And I can tell you that a man does not challenge his *Chi* to wrestling match" (33). Thus, while opposing colonialism with an intention of preserving indigeneity, he is degrading his own tradition, too because "the centralization of authority in a country automatically entails a resurgence of the authority of the father" (Fanon 142). In fact, colonialism is a complex network involving laws, principles and values of the colonized, and produces hybridization of culture. So when the colonized opposes the authority of the colonizers, he must be aware of the reality that his repressed desire still continues to exist in his unconscious and it obviously contradicts his adherence to the root or tradition. Hence, Obi's subsequent involvement in the practice of bribery makes the readers think that he possesses a repressed desire of a mimic man even if he openly contradicts the chairman of the interview board.

This duality is further seen when he feels persecuted by the proposal of his father, "Tomorrow we shall all worship at church. The pastor has agreed to make it a special service for you" (45). Obi feels irritated. He rather proposes to say prayer at home. Encountering native tradition with a European mindset he contradicts and says: "What would happen if I stood up and said to him: "Father, I no longer believe in your God"? He knew it was impossible for him to do it, but he just wondered what would happen if he did. He often wondered like that" (45). Obi has not even read the Bible well and developed a retarded belief in Christianity. In fact, he has fallen into the junction of *Chi* and Christian God and it leads him to ambivalence. This ambivalence results from his being aloof from his own tradition or root.

The task of deviating the colonized is done by the colonizers very deliberately and "The most serious blow suffered by the colonized is being removed from history and from the community" (Memmi 91). The education and the hegemony of the colonizers have usurped Obi from his root. Identity requires both affinities and affiliations in association with self-understanding. True, colonial hegemony saddles the locals with the colonizers' indispensable vocabulary. The mistake that Obi commits is that he tries to develop affinity with the colonial hegemony and for affiliation he depends on the same.

Furthermore, his breach with his mother may be explained with an incident of his childhood. Obi cannot forget the drops of blood oozing from the wound she received in her hand from the blade in the pocket of Obi's pants while washing it. The final blow which shatters the father-son and mother-son relationship is the issue of Obi's marriage. His father does not support it. Obi refers to their religion, Christianity, and tells his father that they are Christians and "The Bible say that in Christianity there are no bound or free" (106). But he fails to understand that to his father tradition is more powerful than religion. He also fails to understand that his father is more a traditionalist than a Christian. He explains to Obi: "Our fathers in their darkness and ignorance called an innocent man *Osu*, a thing given to idols, and thereafter he became an outcast, and his children, and his children's children forever" (106). Obi helplessly tries to place Christianity as a shield against the tradition of his 'heathen kinsmen' but fails to convince his father who believes that "*Osu* is like leprosy in the minds of our people" (107). Now Obi realizes that by only becoming a Christian and speaking the language of the colonizers, he cannot bring down his tradition as it lies at the centre of cultural hybridity.

Obi fails to estimate his position as a part of his own tradition. He seems to believe that only by receiving the religion and language of the colonizers a mimic man can aptly fight back his tradition. He is also deceived in his

assessment of his mother who, despite being a Christian, interprets her life with a dream, closely related to Igbo tradition. She considers the context of her dream with the content of Obi's letter to Joseph who previously revealed to her that Obi was going to marry an *Osu*. She looks upon Obi's decision of marrying an *osu* as a metaphor of her death that she has dreamt of. She warns him, "But if you do the thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself" (108). In fact, Obi, out of ignorance, gets involved in a clash with his mother and this ignorance lies in his failure to understand that identity does not mean adherence to self-interest, but to achieve profound comprehensibility or self-understanding and it emanates from the affiliation of local culture which Obi abjures in the attempt of thinking like a progeny of the colonial masters.

As it usually happens with a mimic man, Obi has looked upon his society as a personal or subjective structure and mistakenly believed that he himself will give recognition or affiliation to it. But, he fatally forgets that a society and an individual recognize each other through mutualisation. A society, in the language of Althusser, "recognizes me, tells me that I am valued, and so makes me by that very act of recognition into a free, autonomous subject" (Eagleton 172). But Obi assumes that:

He can stand 'aloof' from the corruption in society, instead of campaigning vigorously to win people to his own way of thinking so as to tackle the problem collectively, leads to his own failure as the pressure of trying to withstand corruption alone proves too difficult. Similarly his supposition that he can act outside established values, as demonstrated by his decision to marry Clara, an *osu*, fails because of his instability to recognize that such a tradition can be changed only by the people and not by an individual. (Okolo 69-70)

True, a man becomes united with his society in the process of proper and true absorption of his ideology because it works as a powerful factor

determining his identity. Ideology has got an active impact on both the unconscious and conscious of an individual and makes a whole entity:

Ideology in this sense may include the act of going to church, of casting vote, of letting women pass first through doors; it may encompass not only such conscious predilections as my deep devotion to the monarchy but the way I dress and the kind of car I drive, my deeply unconscious images of others and of myself. (Eagleton 172)

Hence, a man is not a self generating and autonomous entity; his identity is to a large extent formed by ideology and the ideological sphere. When a man subjects himself to his ideology he becomes a subject. But when he intends to bring a foreign ideology in parallel with his own, it creates crisis. Obi's inclination to Western ideology leads him to ambivalence when his local Igbo ideology acts as a block on his way to the implementation of his desires of marrying Clara by breaking the taboo of his local tradition. Showing adherence to the colonial ideology, Obi becomes a mimic man and challenges his native tradition. On his part, this challenge is an attempt of deconstructing the age old Igbo tradition which offers a taboo on his Western attitude. His idealistic attitude towards the Western ideology has hindered him to accommodate his local culture and it creates his identity crisis.

But "Deconstruction is not destruction or decomposition..., it is reconstruction" (Pattanayak 161). Reconstruction does not mean the demolition of originality or root. It is a modification and compromise between the new and the old. But Obi probably forgets it and with European education he behaves as though he could pass by his native tradition. His arrogant reaction towards the Umuofian Progressive Union, particularly when the president criticises his love for an *Osu* girl, alienates him from his community. As soon as the president of the Union tells him, "I have heard that you are moving around with a girl of doubtful ancestry and even

thinking of marrying her..." Obi flies into a rage (65). He even threatens the president to take him to the court for taking a hand into his personal affairs. He does not wait to listen to him any further. He says that he will pay off the instalment of his debt 'this moment'. He leaves the meeting; jumps into his car and drives off to the lodgings of Clara.

The clash that takes place between Obi and Umuofian Progressive Union metaphorically refers to the clash between an individual and the community. In the clash Obi meets his identity crisis and consequently, it alienates him from his own people. His final alienation occurs when he completely fails to develop empathy in his mind. Due to the staunch grip of colonial hegemony, he becomes unable to identify himself with his fellow men. True, human soul has the faculty of perceiving what actually exists and what may occur in future. Intrusion of colonial hegemony leads a man to a kind of ignorance which engulfs his faculty or empathy and "[T]he inability to identify oneself with another may lead so far that an individual refuses entirely to cooperate with his fellow men" (Adler 60). Obi's inability to reconcile himself with his community emanates from his subjugation to the colonial hegemony that has acted as a block on the way to mutualisation between the individual and the community.

After coming back from England, Obi can't adjust himself with the parallel existence of tradition and colonial liberalism. He has borrowed liberalism from the colonizers' education. But his attitude is vehemently challenged by the established tradition of his own country. He is suspicious about the Christian God. But he cannot tell it to his father. His liberal attitude cannot make a way for him to marry Clara. He is strongly opposed by his tradition. Besides, he initially tried to fight against corruption and bribery. In his first meeting with the Umuofian Progressive Union he proposes to serve his country well and truly: "With our great country on the threshold of independence, we need men who are prepared to serve well and truly" (26).

But gradually falling into the temptation of a bourgeois lifestyle, he surrenders himself to the desire for luxury, comfort and status of his colonial masters. The Nigeria that Obi dreamt of while staying in England is utterly different. He is surprised to see how things change due to the huge impact of colonialism. The poem that he wrote during his stay in England, 'during his first winter' incarnated his utopian vision of Nigeria but now Lagos, a city of Nigeria, contradicts him: "Here was Lagos, thought Obi, the real Lagos he hadn't imagined existed until now. During his first winter in England he had written a callow, nostalgic poem about Nigeria. It wasn't about Lagos in particular, but Lagos was part of the Nigeria he had in mind" (13).

Thus, Obi discovers to his utter frustration that Nigeria has become a country where corruption and bribery are deeply rooted. Clash between tradition and new Western mode of life has become a common phenomenon and this juncture has confused him and led him to complete failure. But living in midst of all these confusions and anxieties, he initially tries to remain pure and honest and in doing so the error that he makes is that he cannot adjust himself with the parallelism of the new colonial fashion of life and local tradition. He fails to show the inflexibility and courage of his grandfather, Okonkwo, in the face of cultural hybridization. In fact, "While courage and inflexibility ruled the society of Okonkwo, his grandfather, Obi is a typical product of modern era that mixes motives and values, a miserable amalgam, the offshoot of a week, Hybrid culture" (Moanungs 215). But the drawback that is common in both of them is their failure to understand that a community is more powerful than an individual. Both of them think that they can fight against changes that the colonizers have brought going out of and against their community.

Defiance towards traditional values accelerates Obi's predicament. He also fails to understand his parents' rooted devotion to their indigenous culture. His ultimate discovery of this truth makes him realize the futility of his

attempt of becoming a mimic man. Consequently, falling into the ambivalence caused by juncture of indigeneity and colonialist culture, he turns into a corrupt man; involves himself in illegal sexual relationship with a girl, seeking scholarship even if he has already decided to marry Clara. To meet up the need of his desire and family, he needs more and more money. He has to pay money for medical treatment of his mother, for the study of his brother, for paying the instalment of his debt to the Umuofian Progressive Union and above all, for covering his day to day expenses. Being confronted with the grim realities of life, he realizes that his ideas of purifying his country from corruption are next to illusion. Clara also deserts him after undergoing an abortion while she realizes that Obi is too frail to stand against his tradition and to marry her. Thus, Obi embraces failure with a pathetic realization that an individual can never stand against a community and the surprise which is expressed by one of the judges of his trial in the first chapter of the book, makes the readers explore the factors responsible for Obi's predicament: "I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this" (2). He also fails to understand that the rise of Obi is the rise of "the new errand boys of international monopoly capitalism that make total liberation difficult..." (Wa Thiongo 30). Obi's subjugation to the colonizers' life-style suits the legacy of colonialism which promotes the economic penetration of capitalism into less developed regions like Nigeria.

In fine, through the character of Obi, Achebe has portrayed how the post-colonial generation of Nigeria is trying to absorb the new system of English colonizers. He has also explored the indigeneity of social, cultural and psychological phenomena which acts as a block on the way to this assimilation. Mere imitation of the culture of the colonizers transforms the locals into mimic men or quixotic heroes, who, owing to observing life with borrowed ideals are inevitably lost in cultural hybridity. Obi is born in Igbo culture but educated in England and he feels himself alienated in his own

country as he is lost in all his attempts owing to the rules of his local tradition and culture. He struggles but fails to establish his Western ideals in his own country and even fails to bring about a synthesis between his indigenous culture and the colonialist culture. This failure has become fatal for him because it leads him to his identity crisis.

Note

ⁱ The English Education Act was a legislative Act of the Council of India in 1835. It proposed to reallocate funds for teaching a Western curriculum with English as the language of instruction. It also wanted to promote English as the language of administration and of the higher law courts instead of Persian and Sanskrit languages. Consequently, English became one of the leading languages of India. In discussions leading up to the Act Thomas Babington Macaulay produced his famous Memorandum or *Minute* on Indian Education and here he proposed that the British should produce a class of people who would be Indian in blood but English in taste.

ⁱⁱ Kipling's famous colonial poem "The White Man's Burden" was written in 1899. In this poem Kipling has called the colonized "Half devil and half child" to show that they are devoid of civilization. Hence, for civilization and progress the colonized must take up the White Man's burden or the yoke of colonial enterprises.

ⁱⁱⁱ In "Shooting an Elephant" George Orwell, criticized the British Imperialism, but portrayed the Burmese people, their language, laughter and behavior with derogative adjectives, for example, 'hideous', 'devilish', 'perplexing' etc. In fact, in this piece of writing Orwell has depicted the colonized people with negative images.

^{iv} Jacques Lacan, a French psychologist, believes that the human subject is always split up between conscious and unconscious. He considers that unconscious the discourse of the "Other" and structured like language. With the signifier the individual hides his desire and thus language becomes a mask to disguise his desire. In this way, unconscious becomes an 'intersubjective' space between people and so according to Lacan, 'the unconscious is structured like language.'

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