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**Dynamic language and loss of identity in the new postcolonial being in  
Chinua Achebe's 1960 *Not Longer at Ease***

Nombre: Manuel Nicolás Calvo Irrazabal  
Profesor Guía: Pablo Villa Moreno  
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“The last four or five hundred years of European contact with Africa produced a body of literature that presented Africa in a very bad light and Africans in very lurid terms. The reason for this had to do with the need to justify the slave trade and slavery.”

Chinua Achebe

## **1. Acknowledgments**

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## 2. Introduction

The 1960 Chinua Achebe's novel *No longer at ease* transcribes in realist conventions the post-colonialist African experience, taking individual experience and choice as a pattern for a sacred state of affairs. In its essence, the novel is nothing but a parable, exhibiting features that are rather political and nationalist than humanistic. The narrative plot is a fairly simple one: Nigeria, late 1950s, Lagos, a young Christian Civil Servant of African descent (Obi Okonkwo) is tried and found guilty for taking bribe, confirming thus a fifteen-year-old colonial conviction that all Africans were corrupt. By constant use of flashbacks the reader discovers his past in this young Igbo man. Since the protagonist had shown remarkable intellectual qualities, he receives financial support to get a university degree in Law in England. In time, he changes his mind and swaps Law for English, thus, failing to respond to the juridical and political needs of the African community that had supported him. Yet, he becomes a Civil Servant responsible for scholarships in Lagos and he is introduced to the underground practice of bribery, which he downrightly refuses. But, since he is faced with debts and family trouble (his mother dies and he is blamed for her death since he wanted to marry an *osu*, an outcast), he almost unconsciously accepts bribery. He is caught red-handed and finally sent to trial.

The novel, which has an open ending and symbolically starts with the final scene, is circular in composition, this trait supporting Achebe's intention of demonstrating the perpetuation of a particular state of affairs, which is the corruption that has taken over the entire country. To a

certain extent, this image echoes the novelist's opinion originating in an Igbo saying that asserted this pattern "Where one thing falls, another stands in its place." (Achebe 10-12)

From the very first lines of his novel, the African novelist is set on creating an antihero who continues his analysis of the reality surrounding the Igbo people before and after European colonization. As part of an original project that tries to account for the African identity, *No Longer at Ease* stands as the second novel of a book that Achebe splits into three. If in the first novel, *Things Fall apart*, Okonkwo rejects western colonizing violence with violence, the second finds Obi, Okonkwo's grandson, as a colonized subject.

The first scene mirrors in fact an Obi's apparent state of a split self, of an individual that strives to detach himself from a world he got rejected from; however, indifference and insensitivity prove insufficient for Obi as the loyalty towards his own aspirations involuntarily make him betray his self-chosen antiheroic pose. To a certain extent, he seems to have remained an idealistic individual who got caught in the elusive game of power.

"I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this" (Achebe 4)

In this scene, Obi's attitude of accepting bribe was unthinkable among people, given the educated background that he received in England. What is more, his possible role as a hero of his community was vanished immediately. In this sense, one may think that all the education that Obi once received in Lagos was not enough to find a practical solution toward difficult situations that he might live, acting only as an uncolonised man.

Another point that is important to recall in Achebe is the use of language. Achebe uses the English language (the colonizer language) to talk about Africa itself; a new way of seeing Africa, and the reason of this is because he wants to recreate a new vision of the continent by erasing the old one and create one closer to Achebe's point of view. Therefore, language has an important mission for him, in a sense that it shows the good Africa that is not different from European realities. At this point, Achebe wants to take over the English language and balance Occidental texts against Africa. Said explained in *Culture and Imperialism (1993)*:

Authors such as Achebe "...bear their past within them-as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a new future" (Said 31)

For Achebe how people act in the present is a consequence for past events lived. Therefore, what he is doing is rewriting black literature from a black-realistic perspective that was never written before. In *Colonialism/Postcolonialism (1998)* by Ania Loomba, one quote found for Achebe regarding language is:

"For me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it...I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suits its new African surroundings." (91)

Therefore, attitudes to languages and language varieties societies display are parts of the cultural knowledge and identity in Ibo's relatives making up the symbolic market constitutive of a social group in the novel. Thus, language and loss of identity are considered crucial elements in Obi's attitudes toward a new postcolonial being.



### 3. Background

A mixture of discourses and a rather risky separation of good and evil were bound to collide at the dawn of colonialism and capitalism in Africa around the 60s. Many decades ago black people were considered an inferior race in the world that was suppressed by whites, and not only the skin color has been an issue among these people, but also values. Although, during the years it is known that those stigmas and misconceptions about them were only wrong perceptions that writers gave through literature. Concepts on marginalities still maintain a contemporary relevance due to its revisionist practices, and because it stretches from an articulated discourse of minority to those of ethnicity, post-colonialism, and the culture of the outsider. Thus, marginality tends to become a universal controversial movement for Africa, due to the negative perspective that Western literature had been showing toward the African values. Underlining the strategies of the marginal, Leitch puts a stress on the artistic movements of the minority colonized culture of Africa, which tend to rely on “rhetorical tricks, clever gambits, simulations, hedonism and inventive art of life” (101) This model of the marginal would be that of the possibility “to talk plurally of literatures and of poetics, of differences without dominations” (103) With “dominations” Leitch means to the dominance that outsiders toward Africans. Indeed, one can understand that the discourse of the marginal is the one of self-liberation on the one hand and, it is the self-representational discourse that inescapably can be thought of a quest for social group or individual identity, on the other hand. For instance, it was shown that the literatures of the so-called Third World society are first concerned with establishing an anti-colonialist discourse, filled with historic landmarks and a

legitimizing recognizable, ethos and then in a secondary stage, they shifted the focus on individual matters as self-autonomy, independence, and self-fulfillment.

About a half-century ago, rising agitation for independence forced European colonial powers to grant sovereignty to African states. Acceleration of the pace of decolonization can be attributed to two vectors: first, the fast speed with which emergent nationalist leaders mobilized rural populations that had seemed inert, contributing to the popular belief that decolonization was inevitable; second, the enormous cost of containing armed challenges, or even waves of violent protest, and the mounting casualties on both sides. Whether the new states were ready for the task ahead was insignificant. In this sense, Simon During sets off an investigation of the post-colonialist discourse by emphasizing that the term in itself had changed a sort of “conceptual annihilation” due to its association, coincidence with as well as inclusion within the epoch of post-modernity. (Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin 125)

Moreover, During stresses some of the key words that are a part of a post-colonialist metalanguage: identity, image, (un)contamination, imperialism, legitimation, the Other/ the Same, (de)colonized communities. It is from here that one may start circumscribing the features of the postcolonial literature or novel. By making use of a plain reduction, we may say that the postcolonial literary features tend to overlap with those of the postmodernist literature. In the colonial novels we may recognize features that are usually attributed to postmodernism: the hybrid blending, the language issue, the parodic deconstruction, the ideological, dominant rhetoric.

“The term (post-colonialism) is not only inadequate to the task of defining contemporary realities on the once-colonised countries, and vague in terms of indicating a specific period of history, but may also cloud the internal social and racial differences of many societies.” (Loomba 8)

What Loomba in *Colonialism/Postcolonialism* (1998) is also stating the different implications that Postcolonialism means, and not only in cultural aspects, but also in racial misconceptions, language predominance, ideological religions, political aspects, etc. For instance, it is important to mention one scene of the novel in which Obi is described someone converted by religion and behaved like that:

“Being a Christian convert---in fact a Catechist---he could not marry a second wife.”  
(Achebe 8)

Here, in comparison to his grandfather Okonkwo who was allow to have more than one wife, Obi follows religious rules in a way to behave to a civilized man in postcolonial times. In this aspect, obeying imposed European rules were considered as a normal and new reality in Obi’s neighbors.

For many critics, Chinua Achebe (1930-2013) was one of the writers who played with the language between the English and the Igbo culture in realistic literatures about African people. Not only with his famous book *Things Fall Apart* (1958) was considered as “the father of

African fiction” (Booker & Gikandi 54), but with *Not Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964) did too. “These novels are concerned with traditional Igbo life as it clashed with colonial powers in the form of missionaries and colonial government” (Achebe 1).

In this sense, Achebe’s narratives of (post) colonialism still remain one of the significant reference points for many novels that were written in the last period of historical colonialism in Africa and the first epoch of independence. In this aspect, it is necessary to consider that his narratives of (post) colonialism refer to a forming period of the (post) colonial African continent in which these novels have been guided in mapping out the nature of Africa culture and the institutions of literary interpretation since his works occupy a crucial place in the teaching of African literature.

Achebe, for example, owes considerably of his worldwide fame not only to his talent to narrate an attractive story, but also to his stylistic ability to recast the English language. Therefore, Desai in *A Companion to Postcolonial Studies* (2000) recalls Achebe classic essay, *The African Writer and the English Language*, and let that Achebe himself talk about his use of English in novels:

‘Allow me to quote a small example, from *Arrow of God* which may give some idea of how I approach the use of English.

The Chief Priest in the story is telling one of his sons why it is necessary to send him to church: “I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it well you do not

stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow.”’ (527)

If this scene from this book, the use of language need to be use not only from one perspective, but from many. Indeed, a reality cannot be seen in one way; in one character. Thus, for Achebe, language is a powerful tool that reshape reality, and that is what he does with this postcolonial story; reeducate Europeans towards a new way of seeing Africa. The self-conscious use of this kind of language allowed writers such as Salman Rushdie to bring to the world of literature the various mixture languages in postcolonial contexts.

Moreover, it is important to emphasize the importance that Achebe’s works does and will do in later generations. His new perspective of colonialism in Africa was not only a transformation of perspective for the Western, but it was around the world. Indeed, critics also highlight the political and cultural content of Achebe’s novels, which is closely interwoven with his firm belief in his pedagogical role as a writer. “We must all write our histories and cultures descriptively in a new way; we share the same history, even though for some of us that history has enslaved.” (Said, 274) Therefore, despite the fact of living in one reality, perspectives are important to understand history.

During an interview made for the Unesco Courier Magazine toward his process of writing, Achebe stated: “I am constantly looking for that moment when an old story suddenly reveals a new meaning.” (Achebe) In this aspect, language takes over in reality in the sense that it is important to see life’s episodes from different angles, so one can understand the whole scene meaningfully.

“That was the way I was introduced to the danger of not having your own stories. There is that great proverb—that until the lions have their own historians, the history of the hunt will always glorify the hunter. That did not come to me until much later. Once I realized that, I had to be a writer. I had to be that historian. It’s not one man’s job. It’s not one person’s job. But it is something we have to do, so that the story of the hunt will also reflect the agony, the travail—the bravery, even, of the lions.” (Achebe)

In this part of the interview for the Paris Review interview *The Art of Fiction* (n°139) what Achebe recalls is that the lion is the European monster who has the power to control its jungle, its world. Therefore, with his childhood experiences, and his way of writing novels were realities to show worldwide, he wanted to be that hunter who was glorify by showing to the world the other part of Africa.

Moreover, diversity in the way of using a simple language is as important as a complex one:

“T. S. Eliot was quite different. I had to study him at Ibadan. He had a kind of priestly erudition—eloquence, but of a different kind. Scholarly to a fault. But I think the poem from which I took the title of *No Longer at Ease*, the one about the three magi, is one of the great poems in the English language. These people who went and then came back to their countries were “no longer at ease” . . . I think that that is great—the use of simple language, even when things talked about are profound, very moving, very

poignant. So that's really all there is to it. But you'll notice that after those first two titles I didn't do it anymore." (Achebe)

Showing different patterns of languages show realities, life experiences, wounds, educations, religions, cultures, emotions, that one particular tribe, organization, or community has. This is why Achebe in the same aforementioned interview empathized the simple language used in T.S. Eliot's poem. Regarding this, he displays a tendency towards a dialogic debate with the works of the Western modernity, which from his standpoint have deformed the image of the African community; a displacement of the Western set of values and an axiological revalorization of the African approach.

Achebe in an interview for the University of gave his opinion about how a society can mislead too many wrong perception about itself:

“the long-term impact of British colonialism in West Africa, dramatizes social and economic dilemmas still facing modern Africa and has helped lay a vital part of the stylistic as well as thematic groundwork for important works of African literature that have followed” (2013 2).

In this sense, it is important to mention that the conquest of Christianity in the African culture brought “the conflict tradition versus modernity also translates as the conflict between rural values and urban ones” (Achebe 3). Critics have considered that Achebe's work can easily be

divided into two paradigms. The first one is that the type of novel that he wrote are the conflicts concerned with an Africa pre-colonial against colonialism. The second paradigm displays a sense of the crisis of post-colonialism. These paradigms of clashes of cultures are being discussed for many years about literalists, and the discussion is still carried on. Besides, Achebe showed the real Africa, and the real traditions that, for instance, the Igbo culture had to live around 50s, with different traditions from nowadays.



#### 4. Analysis

In *No Longer at Ease* reveals the clashes that the Igbo tribe has with the presence of the European attitudes. In this sense for most of African people values and traditions are key factors that people had decades ago and even now. Therefore, this particular attitude is one reason to refuse the arriving of an external culture to their lives. For example, bravery is one of the attitudes that Obi, the main character of the book, has during the book. At the beginning of the story Michael Obiajulu Okonkwo, referred to as Obi is accused of accepting twenty pound bribe. This kind of situation is present during the whole story in a way that at the end of it can be seen as a manifestation of an urban culture. “*No Longer at Ease* traces official corruption as only one manifestation of the decadence that is tied to the modern urban environment” (Achebe, 2013 2). In this part of accepting bribery, one can think about the amount of money of this act; it is not about the money, but about the loss of identity. In this way, Obi is under a lot of deceptions in his life that one way of escaping from that is accepting the bribe. “It is all lack of experience...He (Obi) should not have accepted the money himself.” (7) Nevertheless, Achebe did not express the city as a corruptive environment, but as a way of enlightenment:

“Achebe is not unjust though as he admits to the merits of the city. It is through the work the city offers to migrants from Obi’s home district of Umofia that they are able to collect enough money to establish the scholarship that provides him with an education in England—an education that they believe will benefit them (especially if

Obi becomes a lawyer) as well as Obi. The city is the source of other, government-sponsored university scholarships (including ones to England), and the benefits of such an education and of university education in general are undeniable” (4)

Another aspect that emerges from this first scene and which will be iterated across the entire novel is that of the antithetic and mostly polemic play of appearances with reality. In the last sentence of the next selection, the author creates expectations and then he denies them, undoubtedly having a polemic target in mind:

“He had expected it and rehearsed this very scene a hundred times until it had become as familiar as a friend. In fact, some weeks ago when the trial first began, Mr. Green, his boss, who was one of the Crown witnesses, had also said something about a young man of great promise. And Obi had remained completely unmoved. Mercifully he had recently lost his mother, and Clara had gone out of his life. The two events following closely on each other had dulled his sensibility and left him a different man, able to look words like 'education' and 'promise' squarely in the face. But now when the supreme moment came he was betrayed by treacherous tears.” (1-2)

Although the novel ends up without resolution about Obi’s behavior, the novel gives quite room for various interpretations, but without making any clear excuse for Obi, having in mind

the type of intellectual individual who had a bright future ahead, since his self-destructive choice for taking bribe was virtually impossible to comprehend for most of the Europeans and natives:

“Everybody wondered why. The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how an educated young man and so on and so forth. The British Council man, even the men of Umuofia, did not know. And we must presume that, in spite of his certitude, Mr. Green did not know either.” (170)

Thus, loss of identity is definitely one of the feelings that Obi is having in his mind, due to his nonsense acts showed at the beginning of the story, and on the surface, Obi is the individual who had missed his bright future by taking bribe and by aligning himself to a caste he actually despised since in the 1957 Africa of Chinua Achebe was a patriarchal land, where the struggle was led mainly for survival through all means. Obi is in this case the hero and the antihero of the making of a new individual, is the new and paradoxical offspring of a culture and country that is in an indefinite quest for a stable identity. Obi could be seen as synecdoche in itself, as the prototype of the new generation, the embodiment of a new, better and autonomous self. However, Obi remains throughout the novel a prisoner of the cultural mix between the Biblical wisdom of his Umuofia, the oppressed past before the colonists came and the heritage the Western left behind in terms of culture and mostly mentality. This entrapment between antithetic worlds seems to be transformed in the novel in the overall problem of the novel. Post-colonialism is reinforced as a grand theme, but the approach from which this theme is

tackled remains the image of the protagonist's being caught in the nets of several elusive worlds.

Another scene that highlights language is the return of Obi to Nigeria, a return which makes room only for further tensions as his return home, to Nigeria:

“Four years in England had filled Obi with a longing to be back in Umuofia. This feeling was sometimes so strong that he found himself feeling ashamed of studying English for his degree. He spoke Ibo whenever he had the least opportunity of doing so. Nothing gave him greater pleasure than to find another Ibo-speaking student in a London bus. But when he had to speak in English with a Nigerian student from another tribe he lowered his voice.” (50)

To a certain extent, what Achebe achieves to recreate here is the profile of the intellectual, which Obi embodies up to his unfortunate destiny. He seems to be the model of the 1950-1960 intellectuals who at that time were almost entirely dependent for their support with the African university, an institution whose intellectual life is overwhelmingly constituted as Western. The same way as Said mention, language can create “an effort at the restoration of community and repossession of culture that goes on long after the political establishment of independence nation-states” (Said, 213). It is within these spaces that he moves and evolves, either proud or humiliated, but without ever forgetting his origin, his land or language.

Another point to emphasize the new postcolonial being is the use of language in Obi. In this aspect, every first Saturday of every month, Obi and his friend Joseph attend a meeting where people from Umofia talk about their lives:

“‘What department he de work?’

'Secretary to the Scholarship Board.'

"E go make plenty money there.

Every student who wan' go England go de see am for house.'

"E no be like dat,' said Obi.

'Him na gentleman. No fit take bribe.'

'Na so,' said the other in unbelief.”

(59)

This type of Umofian language still use among them denotes how connect Obi is with his tribe. It should not be reason to use this type of language in his life. Therefore, his being still wants to remember his past as an African member of a tribe without leaving aside his new educated background. Moreover, the same use of this kind of language is seen at the beginning of this novel as well, “Ori oda---bloody fool! Replied Obi” (15). Thus, among the whole novel there are part that for Obi it is important to highlight through language where he comes from. As Said mention regarding past:

Writer such as Achebe "...bear their past within them-as scars of humiliating wounds, as instigation for different practices, as potentially revised visions of the past tending toward a new future, as urgently reinterpretable and redeployable experiences, in which the formerly silent native speaks and acts on territory taken back from empire" (Said, 31).

This is the reason of Achebe's use of the past in language; to make a difference between the past and the new future for Obi. Using both types of language, one as reader may note that the former language use aforementioned is not Obi's language anymore, and that English is.

Finally, at the end of the novel, when Obi went to see Clara, his fiancée, in Umofia, another perspective of the use of Language is manifested by a patient who was waiting in the same hospital as Obi:

"You tink because Government give you car you fit do what you like? You see all of we de wait here and you just go in... Foolish man. He tink say because him get car so derefore he can do as he like. Beast of no nation!" (115)

Here, the language used by a patient in the hospital against Obi is more a complaint against Obi than a reminder of his past. The uses of mistakes in spellings, and grammar features

shows the type of uneducated background that people from Umofia is used to have, and how lucky was Obi for being an educated member. However, one can see that this act is Obi's past that will never be separated from Obi's life.

## 5. Final Thoughts

To end up with this work, it is important to recall some important features that were present through this research. For Achebe, English is the colonizer language that has an objective: to transform life's perspectives. It is a weapon that can shape reality, to see whether a colonized or decolonize world. In this sense, he wants to do the second objective, and reeducate people toward Africa's perception. In addition to this, the feeling of belonging to a postcolonial era and a precolonial at the same time creates the feeling of losing identity in Obi along the whole story. Therefore, both aspects, language and loss of identity, create the new postcolonial being in Achebe's *Not Longer at Ease*.

Moreover, one should interpret this type of writing as a narrative of ideological and cultural investigation, of raising awareness of the consequences of imperialistic politics on the minor cultures. Not only political features are presented in this novel, but cultural and religious as well. Thus, continuing fights between the past and the future are always present in Obi's thoughts.

Finally, features about precolonial and postcolonial attitudes are inserted along the whole story, and Obi is the one who deal with the transition from one stage to the other. And Achebe thinks that Africa was built as a similarity of Europe in order to impose the European model toward Africa.



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