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POST STRUCTURALIST FEATURES IN AFRICAN FICTION - A STUDY OF ACHEBE'S *NO LONGER AT EASE*

Dr. Mary Susan, Associate Professor, Department of English, St. Xavier's College, Trivandrum

Abstract:

*Any reading of Chinua Achebe's fiction shows how Nigerian fiction tries to recontextualize the plots and stories of Africans in European fiction, highlighting the choices which they were forced to take in the light of the sequence of events which took control of their lives. Rather than the character becoming destiny as is usually believed of African characters, it is certainly the context which decides the destiny of Nigerian fictional characters. A deconstructive reading along the historical perspective becomes dominant in the novels of Chinua Achebe leaving metaphysical concerns of western individualism along the sidelines. I have tried to read Chinua Achebe's *No Longer At Ease* along these lines, upsetting the universalism advocated by the European structuralist approach leading to 'othering' in their novels on African culture*

Keywords: *Poststructuralism, metaphysics, deconstruction, différance, identity, carnivalesque.*

There have always been two traditions in philosophy. One asserts that there are truths that are universal and eternal. They stand outside history and the physical world. Therefore they are transcendental or ideal in nature. The other school claims that the world is physical and historical and that any truth we arrive at about it is equally historical and equally located within the physical universe. Our knowledge is limited and fallible. The world is not founded on absolutes that exist outside time and space. The first tradition provides a strong claim of authority for those interested in using philosophy to anchor ideas of social order. The second is closer to science than to religion and it promotes the ideal of progressive change. Disputes between these two positions were finally settled by Derrida in 1967 when he strongly reasserted the claims of the second position in three books-*Writing and Difference*, *Of Grammatology* and *Speech and Phenomenon* all published in 1967. According to Derrida, difference generates identity while metaphysics claims that difference arises from identity. One thing one might do with deconstruction therefore is to figure out how texts committed to metaphysical values work by suppressing difference and making it appear as a derivative of identity.

Metaphysics endorses authority and authoritarian political forms. Truth rules unquestioningly. To it women and children are traditionally subordinated. If metaphysics is true, then certainly it deserves to possess social authority. When Shakespeare wrote, the aristocracy laid claim to a logocentric structure in society. More recently, the wealthy have claimed to be more deserving than others, more naturally talented at being magnets for money. To deconstruct is therefore to question the basis of authority and hierarchy in society.

To take a wider vision of the attitude taken by the French school of philosophers headed by Derrida, the play of infinite differences should be given importance. Achebe's fiction *No Longer at Ease* also triggers a play of infinite differences which is obviously visible in the kind of the carnivalesque language which differentiates his novel from the other Eurocentric novels. It is not wrong to say that Achebe's language is the palm-oil with which words are eaten (Bernth Lindfors 48-49). For instance while talking about the power of the written word he prefers to say that the printed word is more like the "uli" that never fades (Chinua Achebe 5). A reading of Achebe is more like a remaking of the African mythology, the

folklores and the proverbs into English.

The novel also creates an awareness of the arbitrariness of the sign and of literature as an autotelic statement and the entire question of meaning can be bracketed thus freeing the critical discourse from the burden of paraphrase. This is the most important post structuralist feature in Achebe.

From chapter 1 onwards, the novel permits a free play of signs. Obi Okonkwo is only one among the innumerable signs in the play. If we take into account the concept that a sign is not a combination of the signifier and a signified but rather a sign only, then the difference created by its relationships with other signs in the novel creates a plurality of meanings and cannot be churned down to a single meaning. Obi Okonkwo then comes down to the level of a sign whose existence is justified by its difference from and relationships to the other characters and the ambience in the novel. Obi's identity or meaning is created not only by his relationship to his own community which according to Achebe, who believes that "a kinsman in trouble had to be saved, not blamed / anger against a brother was felt in the flesh, not in the bone" (Chinua Achebe 7). It is this belief which creates and moulds Obi into what he is i.e. a senior official in the African administration, which means, a coveted European post by the simple and innocent people of Umuofia. Their carnivalesque language betrays the pristine innocence and the depth of their spirituality. For them the best part of the Christian service is "as it was in the beginning, it will be in the end." It strikes a concord with their belief in the masked men who continue the rule of their fore-fathers so that righteousness will be never be hindered from the face of the earth. In fact this righteousness was wiped off with the arrival of the civilizing mission which brought in its course, the evils of bribery and corruption which was till then unknown in their lands. And that is another way of putting it when the President of the Progressive Union of Umuofia says "The fox must be chased away first, after that the hen might be warned against wandering into the bush" (Chinua Achebe 12). The proverbs which keep embellishing the language also prove the mighty source of wisdom and poetry which emanates through the African thinking.

Ironically Obi's full name is Obiajulu which means "the mind at last is at rest" since Obi was the fifth child after four daughters in a row. And Obi was the first son of Umuofia to get into a coveted European post in the Civil Service. The new generation takes the best of the two cultures they have gained education from the universities abroad. But they long for the wisdom and innocence of their forefathers. The metaphoric language which keeps the novel alive and colorful is the relishing factor in the novel. For instance when Obi's father tells him about securing a job:

A job is the first thing. A person who has not secured a place on the floor should not begin to look for a mat (Chinua Achebe 68).

And again when it rains off season that day, Obi's imagination becomes almost mythical:

Actually such rain was unusual. It was as though the deity, presiding over the waters in the sky found on checking his stock and counting off the months on his fingers, that there was too much rain left and that he had to do something drastic about it before the impending dry season (Chinua Achebe 72).

But when Obi is faced with the difficult situation of tiding over the crisis of getting others agree to his marrying an Osu girl, he for the first time expresses a disbelief in his own community's beliefs and tells his father that they are Christians and not heathen. This ideological crisis where everyone around him including his own mother, whom he trusted would change the situation for his good turned against him, Obi decides to buy the engagement ring for his wedding. Clara who feels that she is internally marginalized, for being an Osu tries to move away from Obi for fear of ruining his life. For Obi, "It was scandalous that in the middle of the twentieth century a man could be barred from marrying a girl simply because her great great great great-grandfather had been dedicated to serve a god, thereby setting himself apart and turning his descendants into a forbidden caste to the end of Time. Quite unbelievable."

Here Obi expresses solidarity with the white way of thinking and becomes more objective in his attitude to the customs of his tribe and refuses to feel, with his people rather he thinks with the European. It

is at this point that Obi's life takes a tragic turn where His black self is split by double consciousness where he is now forced to think and act more like the Europeans.

The fact that black culture is fresh, innovative and always in process is attested by the fact that the Umuofia Progressive Union adapts itself to the changing mindset created by the arrival of the Europeans, accepting, what is best in them and trying to conform to changes which will benefit them. Sending their sons to England by sponsoring them with loans which they raise by mercilessly struggling for it is just one instance of the corporate life and fellowship which they upheld at all costs.

Obi's troubles begin when he is put in charge of scholarships to England in the position of secretary of The Scholarship Commission. Obi, like his boss Mr. Green vehemently opposes corruption, bribery and lethargy. As we all know Derrida's most interesting intellectual move was to suggest that difference characterized not only in language but also in all realities. In reviewing Western philosophic tradition, Derrida found many instances where thinkers suppressed difference in order to lay claim to absolute truth. Achebe here deconstructs Mr. Green's statement about Africans especially of Obi that "The African is corrupt through and through".

The whole novel *No Longer at Ease* is an effort at deconstructing this first statement of Mr. Green who is seen in intervals throughout the novel, expressing a partisan attitude that Africans are a mixture of all negative traits. Achebe gives us, a deconstruction of Obi and the other Nigerians not through the eyes of Mr. Green and their likes but through the perspective of the cultural ambience of Africa particularly Nigeria. This is the main spring behind 'No Longer of Ease'. As the title itself suggests, the European education and the European post has done more harm than good to Obi. His European 'post' has begun to attract many people in search of greener pastures towards his flat at IK to bribe him in order to get a lucrative position in life through a British Scholarship. Here we are reminded of Obi's answer at the interview for his job in the civil service that "Conventional tragedy is too easy. The hero dies and we feel a purging of the emotions. A real tragedy takes place in a corner, in an untidy spot" (Chinua Achebe 79).

And the novel *No longer at Ease* only clearly proves that it is a deconstruction of the hierarchical relations between the West and Africa. *No longer at Ease* as a micro narrative here gives a convincing and accurate account of the truth of its own particular discourse. Obi's first battle against one Mr. Mark became almost a one-sided victory with Obi blindly refusing to accept the bribe without further explanations. But as Obi suspected Mr. Mark took Obi's reticence to talk as a sign of submission and sent his sister who had applied for the foreign scholarship to his flat. Obi sends her back with the assurance that with her Grade one she will surely get a scholarship.

Obi was going through terrible financial difficulties since he had his own family at home, his brother John's fees to be paid, repayment of the loan to the Umuofia Progressive Union and other unanticipated expenditures like forty pounds for paying the insurance for the car etc. Obi decides to approach the President with whom Obi had a dispute when he tried to advise him not marry an Osu girl for giving him a breathing space in repaying the loan. Obi is sure that the president would have forgotten about his bout of anger against him since they believed that "anger against a kinsman was felt in the flesh not in the marrow" (Chinua Achebe 112).

But Obi's rethinking of situation once more proves that not only Obi but the other Africans are not corrupt though as Mr. Green would state periodically. For all the sacrifices rendered to Obi, the Umofians were only too ready to take even a heavier share of the burden when suddenly Obi reaches his own point of self-realization. They had taxed themselves mercilessly to raise eight hundred pounds to send him to England. Some of them earned no more than five pounds a month whereas he earned fifty pounds and Obi decides not to tax them.

During a conversation with his friend Christopher about bribery, Obi asserts and educates Christopher not to use one's authority for personal gains. Though Obi has not inherited any of the corrupting influences which come along with authority and power, he is cornered by a series of tragedies in

life his mother's illness, the breaking off of his engagement with Clara, his own financial difficulties etc. But Obi in the midst of all these difficulties, finds comfort in the *Song of the Heart* a nontheistic thinking which keeps the Africans together and wards off their difficulties through what Freud would call a substitution technique. The last line of the song goes like this:

Is everyone here?
Are you all here?
The letter said
That money cannot buy a kinsman
That he who has brothers
Has more than riches can buy"
That night he prayed "God bless our noble country men
and women everywhere (Chinua Achebe 172).

The first instance when Obi was thrust upon with fifty pounds as bribe money for recommending a European scholarship, Obi felt terrible agony on being cheated on his personal principles and convictions. The only words he uttered were "this is terrible! Terrible." Cornered by such helpless situations, Obi finally allows himself to be caught by the anti-corruption cell. The novel ends with an open ended statement "everybody wondered why. The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how an educated young man and so on and so forth" (Chinua Achebe 194).

Mr. Green who had been repeating throughout the novel, that the Africans are corrupt through and through now abandons his one sided conviction regarding Obi. Certainly he has come to accept the changed cultural context of Africa which has sacrificed Obi in their new found greed for European careers and scholarships to make their lives easier and comfortable. Achebe successfully deconstructs the negative trait bestowed on Obi by the European Mr. Green. It is this difference in thinking which makes the African community different. Thus *No Longer at Ease* is a hybrid text which borrows the Western fictional form but embellishes it with an African presence embedded with African variants like corporate life, a dynamic philosophy and a language which carries the huge cultural load of Africa. All the novels of Achebe strain themselves to articulate this and also deconstruct the Western attitude towards the African context.

Work Cited

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