

Liminality and the Problem of Becoming: Re-interrogating the Character of Obi Okonkwo in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract

Obi Okonkwo in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* is a spectacular character whose logic of actions has been probed at different layers of the text by many scholars. Views are almost unanimous in their opinion that Obi's non-conformist stance is a result of his European educational experience. If this is so, one will be left to wonder why Christopher, another character with a similar experience, does not have the same disposition as Obi in relation to the mainstream life of Umuofia society. His ambivalence, therefore calls for a new mode of investigation, which this research undertakes. The research isolates Obi as a character lodged in a liminal space, whose non-conformism/ambivalence, it argues, is not a result of European education as such, but a case of his liminality. Thus, Homi Bhabha's concept of "liminality", which presupposes that "individuals in liminal spaces experience definitional ambiguity [in that] they are no longer classified as what they were but are not yet classified as what they are becoming," is employed alongside his notion of "unhomeliness" to account for Obi's situation in the text. This will establish Obi as a liminal character, whose identity is in process of becoming, and only attains stability with the completion of his cycle of liminality.

Keywords: *Liminality/Liminal Space, Unhomeness, Transition, Postcolonial, Non-Conformism, Identity.*

INTRODUCTION

In Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, Obi Okonkwo's estrangement from the cultural values of Umuofia community, and his rather strange bribery scandal, have been an issue of central concern to literary critics. Some of these critics have tried to read Obi's situation as a function of his exposure to Western education the assumption being that this exposure makes him develop distaste for his people's communal solidarity (see Philip Rogers 1983), since he has come to believe that people should be allowed to lead their own life on their own terms. And since this disposition towards individualism seems to be a Western thing, it follows, then, that there is nowhere else to locate his alien inclinations. This way, little or no effort is made to probe the situation back to the time before he travels abroad to study. One of the most remarkable examples of this view of the text is seen in Abukar and Huang's "Re/inventing Africa: Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*, and the Question of Cultural Others". They opine that *No Longer at Ease* is an account "from an African Perspective, [of] the internal struggle between the indigenous culture and identity to survive under the imposing and usurping weight of colonial modernisation and education" (1-2). Suffice it to say that this is the general opinion that many post-colonial analysts hold of the book.

Nevertheless, there have been other critics who have acknowledged that Obi's predicament is hardly a question of cultural displacement as that of being cast in-between the forces of two cultures. The merit of this reading is that in recognising the liminality of his character, it overcomes the limitation of the former assumptions – that is, by its not identifying

Obi, typically, as a hybrid of two unlike cultures. Akwanya for instance argues that by eventually resolving on his own to abort his plan to marry an Osu, Obi seems to have proved that “he is not even the free, independent individual he seems to have settled for (*No Longer at Ease: The Crippled Dancer and the Labour of Sisyphus*” 5). Obi’s relationship with Clara (and his mother’s disapproval of it) mirrors the broader cultural clash between modernity and tradition. For example, Obi’s attraction to Clara represents his desire to break away from cultural norms, yet his inability to marry her signifies how deeply ingrained these norms are in his subconscious. That his allegiance to his bond with his mother supersedes his commitment to his own philosophy of life is an indication that he is far from being absorbed into the British imperial culture. Of Course, the two women in his life – the two people at the centre of his life – are representative of the respective cultures, and all the more so because loyalty to either of them (his mother and Clara) will require some form of capitulation to the cultural spaces embodied in them. This he never did. The implication of his lack of rootedness in either of the cultures is that his self-image and self-worth will never attain a definite character.

According to Chakraborty, “in the postcolonial discourse, the Colonizer’s culture far from being the simple oppressive force upon the colonized culture, is open to ambivalence” (149). Such profound ambivalence is what keeps the colonized subject in a liminal space. Liminality is perceived as a state of in-betweenness. It connotes the crossing of a threshold; a moment of transition from one state or space to another. It is signified by relocation, such as the changing of social relationships or dislodgements in sociocultural processes. Its outcome can be positive or negative change on the individual or society affected. Moasungsang posits that Obi’s life does not conform to his traditional society or to the English society where he studies. It is his belief that Obi’s life is influenced by both worlds. But if Obi’s life has been/is being influenced by both worlds, it is not in such a way that he can conveniently blend categories from both sides at will. Rather, this influence plunges him into the disorientating crisis of self-definition. The liminality study attempted here is in keeping with Homi Bhabha’s determination of the liminal space as “the threshold environment, where subjectivity finds itself poised between sameness and alterity and new discursive forms are constituted (Theme 144). According to Bhabha, this “interstitial agency [] refuses the binary representation of social antagonism” (Culture’s In-between 58). Hence this paper utilises Bhabha’s theory to negotiate a deeper understanding of Obi’s liminality in *No Longer at Ease*.

The theory of liminality as per postcolonial studies seeks to elucidate the “in-between” space in a postcolonial society inhabited by individuals who are confronted with deep sense of rootlessness and estrangement. Although it was first applied in Psychology in the late 19th century, it was Gennep’s popularisation of the concept in anthropology that influenced its appropriation and modification for postcolonial discourse by Bhabha. For Gennep, the liminal space is both temporal and spatial, and captures the moment when individuals “wavered between two worlds” (*Rites of Passage* 18). Correspondingly, Bhabha explains that liminality “is indeed like culture’s in-between, baffling both alike and different (“Culture’s In-Between” 54). Yet, the focus of this paper is not just on this interstitial location of culture, but is unique in that it goes further to submit that Obi’s liminality does not only appertain to the worlds of his present but beyond. Obi’s personal crisis is not just a consequence of external forces like colonialism, but also the result of a deeper, existential dislocation that is felt universally in postcolonial societies. The loss of certainty within this liminal space illuminates the internalized contradictions faced by many who navigate a complex cultural terrain shaped by both colonial and indigenous influences.

We argue that even the so-called Umuofia culture, which is usually adverted to in contradistinction to the colonial culture, has always been suspended in liminal space – even before Obi Okonkwo is born i.e right from the society of his grandfather in *Things fall Apart*. Hence binary representation of “social antagonism” (Bhabha) can no longer be considered an innocent task, for each of these cultures is already “open to ambivalence”, and all the more to the disorientation of the liminal subject.

Binary Representation of Culture in *No Longer at Ease*

Most readings of *No longer at Ease* interpret Obi’s ambivalence in the text as a corollary of the conflict between Western culture and the Igbo culture. This view presupposes that each of these cultures is originary and undiluted, with conflicting values that the individual is unable to reconcile, and giving rise to what Bhabha calls “pure oppositionality”. However, what is often overlooked here is the possibility of cultural hybridisation which would mean that there has been a complex “interweaving of history” such that between the two cultural spaces, “the sign of the social is condemned to slide ceaselessly from one position to another” (Location 149). What is at issue here is not whether there are instances of collision of values at the macro level – indeed there are – but the question is whether the Umuofia of *No Longer at Ease* can boast of the kind of cultural autonomy that can be attributed to Umuofia of *Things Fall Apart*. Whether there is any cultural space in the former that is free of the “postcolonial margins of modernity” (Location 240) is the kind of question that is hardly posed with regard to *No Longer at Ease*.

The tension between two cultural values can be seen in the life of Obi Okonkwo, especially when one pays attention to his adult life, after he returns from England. A case in point will be his relationship with Clara. His defence for daring to make public his intention to marry her is never hinged on the reason that he is helplessly in love with her, rather, he claims he does not see anything wrong with that. In point of fact, he does not reckon at first that he needs to be a bit more circumspect in the way he broaches the topic in order not to transgress the sensibilities of his people. This disposition of his is definitely not rooted in the culture of his people – who place premium on unconditional adherence to social norms. Hence his position can only be traced to his exposure to Western civilisation; something that lends credence to this is that the decision comes right on the heel of his return from England. But his people who pose real obstacle to this decision are immediate family – his parents. Interestingly, the conflict here is not so much about opposition between his view and that of his people on the propriety of such a marriage, as about his resentment at the propensity of his people to interfere with what he calls his “private matters”. This is the point in his first meeting with Umuofia progressive union after his return when the mutual intelligibility they have shared is lost, with the result that the president’s attempt at solicitude misfires. Accordingly, no sooner does he bring up the issue of his relationship with “a girl of doubtful ancestry” (*No Longer at Ease* 62) than “Obi leaped to his trembling legs with rage” (63).

That Clara is “a girl of doubtful ancestry” is a statement whose import makes no meaning to Obi. But this is a matter that is clear to every Umuofia person; in fact, its “self-evidence” is such that everybody understands that the necessity of probing the provenance of the “concepts and categories handed down to us is something we need not even understand” (Heidegger 43). That statement is as strange to Obi as his own outburst “I will take you to court for that...” will sound to his interlocutor. The latter will humour him with “you may take me to court when I have finished” (*No Longer at Ease* 63); the president obviously does not think that Obi could be serious, for there appears to be an epistemic gulf between them. Obi is further infuriated:

I am not going to listen to you anymore. I take back my request. I shall start paying you back at the end of this month. Now, this minute! But don't you dare interfere in my affairs again. And if this is what you meet about," he said in Ibo, "you may cut off my two legs if you ever find them here again." He made for the door. A number of people tried to intercept him. "Please sit down." "Cool down." "There is no quarrel." Everybody was talking at once. Obi pushed his way through and made blindly for his car with half a dozen people at his heel pleading that he return" (63).

What has been clarified from the foregoing is that this fundamental conflict inheres at epistemic level. In almost every incident that unfolds, we can discern this underlying disconnect in communication. Yet, it does appear as if no one is farther removed from the Umuofia's system of rationality as Obi Okonkwo. Not even Clara is that bold enough to disdain the sacrosanctity of Umuofia's stance on the issue of *osu*.

Nonetheless, it can hardly be accurately maintained that because Obi Okonkwo lacks rootedness in Umuofia society, then he is at home with the Western culture. Indeed, it is while in England that he is confronted with the profoundest feeling of alienation, leading him to seek solace in the romanticised memories of his faraway home. And even after he returns, rarely is he seen showing any form of fascination for the Western life style as it were. For instance, he has serious distaste for Clara's fascination with cinema. Also, for all his brilliance, Obi is unable to form any strong affinity with the dynamics of British education he is exposed to in his school days, evident in his writing a letter to Hitler. In consequence, the Headmaster has to flog him severely for want of good sense. Reminiscing about this experience, he tries to explain to Christopher what might have led him to write the letter:

Obi laughed one of his rare loud laughs. 'I wonder what came over me. I still think about it sometimes. What was Hitler to me or I to Hitler? I suppose I felt sorry for him. And I didn't like going into the bush every day to pick palm-kernels as our "Win the War Effort".' He suddenly became serious. 'And when you come to think of it, it was quite immoral of the headmaster to tell little children to pick palm kernels. (37)

Hence, the collision between cultures in the novel cannot be taken to mean that there are two culturally distinct peoples with each inhabiting either of the two corresponding cultural spaces. On the contrary, in each cultural space, there is already "an interweaving of history", such that even the Umuofia people themselves, in a certain sense can be said to be inhabiting a liminal space. However, the liminality of Obi Okonkwo is quite on another level. These two levels of interstitial spaces will be respectively explored in the next two sections.

Umuofia Culture and the Question of Liminality

No Longer at Ease poses difficulties for anyone seeking to make sense of its incidents through "binary categorisation" (Bode and Jacobson 4). Studies premised on the assumption that there is a clear borderline between western culture and Igbo culture in the novel – the conflict between the two often being the centre of attention – seem to have circumvented examining "the mingling of differences" (Bode and Jacobson 4) inherent in, and transforming, the Umuofia cultural space. Such complex mingling of differences is usually the fate of postcolonial societies, and correlates with the inexorable crisscrossing of frontiers. If the Umuofia culture into which Obi Okonkwo is born has from the beginning lost its "singular, unbroken borderline" (Decker and Winchochock 3), then it would be wrong to think of Obi's journey to England as corresponding to some sort of estrangement from his people's culture. On the contrary, the cultural space into which he is born has itself always been condemned to

different kinds of disruptive encounters through colonial experience. Culture is said to be dynamic, and cannot resist radical transformation when it experiences colonial subjection.

The plot of this novel is inverted; we first encounter the court incident that seals Obi Okonkwo's fate, and thereafter, we keep seeing incessant references to Obi's past. It is as if the emplotment was tailored to advise that we keep casting reflection back to Obi's past. In this past, one of the things first presented to us is his send-off party, where everything suggests that everybody seems ecstatic about norms that they have not mastered. Hence there are such moments when there is subtle ambivalence about what has to done, such as when they have to pour libation to the ancestors. It does seem as if this generation of Umuofia lacks the kind of groundedness that can be associated with the Umuofia of *Things Fall Apart*. In point of fact, the present generation is motivated, at the conscious level, to disdain anything that comes from their past. A good instance of this is seen in Mr Ikedi's exhortation to the seemingly befuddled Obi: "[t]hen he turned to the young man on his right. "In times past," he told him, "Umuofia would have required of you to fight in her wars and bring home human heads. But those were days of darkness from which we have been delivered by the blood of the Lamb of God. Today we send you to bring knowledge" (11). Yet, it seems logical to argue that at the subconscious level, they are still tradition-bound. Then of course there is the factor of names. Inferable in the narrative is an attempt to imbue the Christian names in Umuofia town with some awkward exoticness. Of course, there is no missing the awkwardness in the switch from Nwoye Okonkwo to Isaac Okonkwo, and in the way such names as "Mary" and "Hannah" get a mention.

Isaac Okonkwo's liminality comes staring him in the face when his son brings up the subject of his plan to marry an osu. Obi does not help matters as he confronts his father with the logic that "[he] might have used in talking to a heathen" (NLE 133). His father understands the profundity of his own existential ambivalence at this point, but does not allow the silence that creeps in to reign for too long, for that might have lent some unwelcome agency to his uncertainty. So, he tactfully regains his composure and reinforces his conviction without addressing the fundamental contradiction that Obi raises:

'What is this thing? 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 for ever. But have we not seen the light of the Gospel?' Obi used the very words that his father might have used in talking to his heathen kinsmen.

There was a long silence. The lamp was now burning too brightly. Obi's father turned down the wick a little and then resumed his silence. After what seemed like ages he said: 'I know Josiah Okeke very well.' He was looking steadily in front of him. His voice sounded tired. 'I know him and I know his wife. He is a good man and a great Christian. But he is osu. Naaman, captain of the host of Syria, was a great man and honourable, he was also a mighty man of valour, but he was a leper.' He paused so that this great and felicitous analogy might sink in with all its heavy and dreadful weight (133).

It is as if this unsettling ambivalence haunts all of Umuofia, and we never fail to notice it each time the narrative spotlight is directed at it. It is also here that Obi's eventual loss of his self-certainty is decided.

A careful examination of the affairs of Umuofia Progressive Union will reveal a certain awkward attempt at homogenisation of differences. In the reception party held for Obi, we are told that "everybody was properly dressed in agbada and European suit." The incongruity we

notice in their dress culture is accentuated by Obi's choice of shirtsleeves for an outfit for such occasion. Obi's outfit fails to meet the union's "cultural standard for deciding ... what is [right]" (Goodenough 246). Part of the demand of this cultural standard is that people should come to an occasion like this one with every sense of formality and decorum, even if those entail being dressed in agbada and European suit in a sweltering weather. Bode and Jacobson notes "Bhabha's 'third space of enunciation' is a zone of ongoing cultural exchanges, interventions, and mediations that make the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process ... but that also makes the cross-cultural formation possible" (4). That the structure of meaning and reference we find here has become an ambivalent process reflects on words like "properly" and "impressively" in the last quote from *No Longer at Ease*. What does it mean to be properly dressed and to be impressively turned out? One cannot miss a quirk of ungainliness in the way their fascinations and sense of propriety is narrated. For instance, they find their secretary's English "impressive" and "admir[able]" even though they do not understand it – or precisely because they do not understand it. Obviously, they do not need to understand something in order to consider it proper and impressive – it is enough that it "filled the mouth like the proverbial meat" (33). On the other hand, Obi's English "was most unimpressive", obviously because he said it is simple enough to be understandable – "he spoke 'is' and 'was'" (33). There appears to be something fetishist in their collective psyche.

Something else that is remarkable in this unfolding is the secretary's welcome speech itself. The appropriateness of a formal, scripted address – garnished with expressions that are intended to be impressive even if at the expense of meaning – for such an occasion is nothing short of curious. It is as if these Lagos-based *Umuofians* are more receptive to the strange norms of the Western world than Obi Okonkwo himself. This gains greater emphasis in the fact that this address is being presented to a shirtsleeve-adorned Obi. The question that thus arises is: if the so-called Umuofia culture cannot be distinctly verified in these people, then where is it?

Unhomeliness and Obi's Ambivalence

There are grounds to argue that Obi Okonkwo persistently makes efforts to not get swept along on the tide of the disorientating circumstances in which he finds himself. If it is not in writing a letter to Hitler in his school days, then it is in writing poems about his romanticised homeland from faraway London. In both, we can discern a conscious effort to not lose the balance of his mind. From his poems and musings about an idealised Nigeria, it would seem as if he is returning to a much familiar home the customs and norms of which he would easily settle into, and would therefore set his mind at ease at last – he actually returns with so much hope and enthusiasm. This longing for a home is easily mediated while he is abroad because there seem still some grounds for hope, even if the hope is for the potential of a place to become homely. It is therefore inferable from his situation that he feels profoundly estranged from the Western world, so much so that he manages to forget that the Nigeria of his dream has never existed. Strangely, never remembers actual things or people he has had bond with while at home, such as the kind he has with his mother. Instead, he would imagine a Lagos that he never really knew.

It takes Obi's coming home and getting in touch with the real Nigeria (with the real Lagos and Umuofia) before he realises that the sense of belonging, he had hoped for is his own fantasy. Interestingly, a significant aspect of his estrangement is his inability to identify with his own people, ranging from his immediate family, the Umuofia people at Umuofia, to the *Umuofians* in Lagos. According to Akwanya, although Obi may seem to admire the traditional

ways of Umuofia, what we see when he comes to the village is more like “admiration by an outsider” (10). Yet, even this outsider’s admiration has already created a distance between him and his father, who on the other hand “believed utterly and completely in the things of the white man” (96), and would for instance frown at the “heathen singing” in which the former takes strong fascination on this visit. It recalls Derrida’s reference to the kind of “opposition that both sow confusion between opposites and stands between the opposites at once” (212). Correspondingly, even his mother with whom he has shared very strong bond appears at this point to be receding into a zone of unfamiliarity; she is gradually becoming a stranger, albeit a stranger under whose sway he is powerless. Hence: “Obi was terrified by the change that had come over her. She looked strange as if she had suddenly gone off her head. ... 'Mother!' he called, as if she was going away. She held up her hand for silence” (136). Not only has the familiarity of his mother been greatly undermined here, but he also finds this estrangement as much terrifying.

In view of this inescapable “in-between-ness” (Derrida 212) of his life, one may reason that it therefore just fortunate that Obi Okonkwo returns with a strong resolve to protect his sense of individual identity. Indeed, he might have succeeded in constructing the hybrid identity he has desired, but if only he had been able to break free from the grip of his past. It is the power of this grip that he underestimates when he thinks he can take some fundamental decisions without factoring his people in.

Part of the significance of his visit to his parents is that it is here that he is brought face to face with some aspects of his life that have hitherto remained repressed. For instance, he has always thought the choice of a life partner is such that he should be able to make on his own without interference from anybody, even if his mother. But that he thinks he can pull this out is because he has managed to bar from his consciousness the intricate realities of his interior life. Otherwise, he would have realised that he has not really attained the kind of “releasement” (Heidegger, *Being and Time*) that would enable him to carry out such a decision successfully. On the other hand, should one find oneself in a certain kind of intimacy with one’s situations, Hannah Arendt says, such situations will be brought out “into a sphere where they will assume a kind of reality which, their intensity notwithstanding, they never could have had before” (50). This is keeping with Freud’s statement that the uncanny is “the name for everything that ought to have remained ... secret and hidden but has come to light” (qtd in Bhabha 10).

Bhabha’s “unhomeliness” is a re-conception of Freud’s postulation on the phenomenon of the “uncanny”. He put forward the concept as an attempt to designate this postcolonial condition where one is neither free nor rooted in the cultures one is exposed to. Hence, “in being unhomed, the borders between home and world become confused; and uncannily the private and public become postcolonial margins of modernity” (Location 240). The experience of unhomeliness ties into the condition of liminality. The former is a consequence of finding oneself in a liminal space; it is “the condition of extra-territorial and cross-cultural initiations” (9).

Moments of unhomeliness bring the liminal individual in direct and intimate encounter with some fundamental truths of his or her existence, the results being that he or she now becomes less and less certain of everything. Such moments “creep[] up on you as your own shadow” (9). The paradox of the unhomey experience is that prior to its emergence, the individual might have been certain of his place in the present, and therefore certain also of what to do and may remain ignorant of his or her rootlessness provided that he or she is not confronted by his own “shadow”. However, such superficial certainty cannot remain for long

for the liminal subject, for the “space of liminality [is] the unbearable ordeal of the collapse of certainty” (149).

Bhabha’s notion of unhomeliness offers an important perspective on Obi Okonkwo’s situation in *No Longer at Ease*. Before his return to Nigeria, he appears very certain of the task ahead. This is evident, for instance, in the following lines of his poem:

May we preserve our purity,
Our zest for life and jollity.
God bless our noble countrymen
And women everywhere.
Teach them to walk in unity
To build our nation dear;
Forgetting region, tribe or speech,
But caring always each for each.

He comes back with this “zest” to “preserve [their] unity” and to “build [their] nation dear”. In consequence, he eagerly points out in his speech at his reception ceremony that education is “for service, [and] not for white-collar jobs and comfortable salaries. With our great country on the threshold of independence, we need men who are prepared to serve her well and truly” (33-34) – he is certain that he is one of these men his country needs. The not-yet obvious uncertainty surrounding this aspiration does not immediately dawn on him even after he has settled into the Nigerian civil service.

We see this certainty again in his first interview for a job in the civil service: to the question whether he needs the job so that he can take bribe, he does not think twice before responding outright that “I don’t think it’s a very useful question” (40). He is so sure of what he is for that he feels he cannot deign to answer such a useless question; later, he submits to the protesting Joseph that overlooking what is wrong in order to get a job is “what I call colonial mentality” (41).

Interestingly, if *No Longer at Ease* is a test of Obi’s self-assuredness, he will eventually fail it, and quite woefully, because in this liminal space, the unhomed individual is doomed “for the ordeal of the collapse of certainty”. It does not take long before he realises that if he must remain committed to his ideals, he will be running into a great deal of difficulty with both his people and the colonial authorities. But it does seem that Obi’s greatest obstacle is himself. Hence, whereas it may be easy to disagree with Umuofia People in Lagos – and to even threaten to take them to court, he underestimates the profound subliminal influence that his people wield over his subconscious life. Maybe it will be more accurate to say that he is not consciously aware of this influence, and all the more so because he has never had to engage it *intimately*.

This is part of the significance of his relationship with Clara, and of his visit to his Umuofia. At the end, not only will he find himself under some inexplicable compulsion to compromise his ideals, but he will lose his certainty, and will never be absolutely sure again of the distinction between right and wrong course of action. Akwanya recognises this fact when he notes that prior to Obi’s shameful fall, his encounter with his mother had “destroy[ed] ... his self-esteem” (10). It is also after this encounter that he realises how unresolved the question of marrying an osu has remained.

Obi's ambivalence, this collapse of certainty that is the fate of the unhomed, is clearly captured in the description of his psychological crisis after the talk with his mother:

He was amazed at the irrelevant thoughts that passed through his mind at this the (sic) greatest crisis in his life. He waited for his father to speak that he might put up another fight to justify himself. His mind was troubled not only by what had happened but also by the discovery that there was nothing in him with which to challenge it honestly. All day he had striven to rouse his anger and his conviction, but he was honest enough with himself to realise that the response he got, no matter how violent it sometimes appeared, was not genuine. It came from the periphery, and not the centre, like the jerk in the leg of a dead frog when a current is applied to it. But he could not accept the present state of his mind as final, so he searched desperately for something that would trigger off the inevitable reaction (137).

Precisely, "the present state of his mind" is the eventual awareness of his unhomeliness, and of his rootlessness. Accordingly, Tyson notes that "to be unhomed is to feel not at home even in your own home because you are not at home in yourself: your cultural identity crisis has made you a psychological refugee" (335). It is at this point that he loses his resoluteness, and claim to individuality, and becomes rather ambivalent about almost everything.

CONCLUSION

In this work, we have tried to examine the reason for Obi Okonkwo's non-conformist/ambivalent position in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, not from the popular European educational influence proffered by many literary analysts but from the point of view of Hommie Bhabha's Post Colonial Theory of Liminality and Unhomeliness. In the light of this analysis we have been able to, through rigorous and systematic arguments based on the facts which the text yields and in connection with other texts within related literary works, posit that Obi Okonkwo, and indeed most of Umuofians – both in their ancestral home and in Lagos – appears to exist in a liminal state which makes it difficult for them to lay claim to a specific identity. This becomes obvious in their socio-cultural interactions among themselves and with Obi. This liminal state which they find themselves in creates a deep sense of unhomeliness which results in identity crisis and maladjustment for Obi. This paper then concludes that relying heavily on binary accounts of European and African educational influence alone to account for Obi Okonkwo's seeming neglect of his people's culture and complexity of character is to overlook a deep semantic reason which is the early signs of his liminality arising from his being born into an already hybridized society with almost everyone in a liminal position even before his travel. They appear to live in the present but the past has a strong hold on them. In the same way Obi desires to live in the present but yet is pulled down by the past being that he is still living in the border between two worlds as Homi Bhabha theorized. Obi's struggle with his cultural identity and self-certainty within the liminal spaces created by colonialism—is significant because it critiques not only his personal crisis but also offers a wider commentary on the ambivalence postcolonial subjects experience when caught between conflicting cultural frameworks. Obi's ambivalence is not simply an individual struggle, but a larger symptom of the postcolonial condition, a theme that *No Longer at Ease* foregrounds with its critique of the postcolonial state. By drawing on Bhabha's concept of "unhomeliness" and Derrida's notion of "in-betweenness," we have highlighted how Obi's inability to reconcile his identity within these cultural dichotomies lead to his psychological collapse. The significance of this approach lies in its revelation that Obi's personal crisis is not just a consequence of

external forces like colonialism, but also the result of a deeper, existential dislocation that is felt universally in postcolonial societies. Our exploration of the loss of certainty within this liminal space illuminates the internalized contradictions faced by many who navigate a complex cultural terrain shaped by both colonial and indigenous influences. This article, therefore, offers a new and vigorous perspective to the study of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*.

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