

Diffusion of English Culture and Identity Crisis in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

Md. Ehasanul Hoque

Lecturer, Department of English, University of Chittagong

doi: <https://doi.org/10.37745/ejells.2013/vol13n22735>

Published June 29, 2025

Citation: Hoque M.E. (2025) Diffusion of English Culture and Identity Crisis in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, *European Journal of English Language and Literature Studies*, Vol.13, No.2, pp.27-35

Abstract: *Chinua Achebe's No Longer at Ease (1960), a sequel to Things Fall Apart, explores the dilemmas faced by postcolonial subjects navigating between indigenous values and imposed colonial culture. Set in the transitional period of Nigeria's journey toward independence, the novel foregrounds the psychological and cultural conflicts experienced by Obi Okonkwo, a Western-educated Nigerian civil servant. Achebe's narrative highlights the consequences of cultural dislocation and hybridization, reflecting the broader struggle of African societies negotiating between colonial modernity and traditional heritage. Through a postcolonial lens, this article analyses how the imposition and internalization of English values, education, and bureaucratic systems disrupt indigenous identities, resulting in a fractured sense of self.*

Keywords: colonialism, hybridity, mimicry, cultural alienation, identity crisis

INTRODUCTION

The legacy of colonialism in Africa is not only institutional but deeply psychological and cultural. Chinua Achebe, a pioneer of African literature in English, critically examines the legacy of colonialism and its cultural implications on African identity. In *No Longer at Ease*, the second instalment of Achebe's African Trilogy, he presents a powerful narrative of a young Nigerian civil servant, Obi Okonkwo, caught between the traditional values of his Igbo heritage and the Western ideologies instilled in him through colonial education.

Achebe's novel explores the impact of colonialism on Nigerian identity, revealing the formation of a hybrid cultural self, torn between traditional indigenous values and colonial influence. This unstable identity, perpetually suspended between two worlds, reflects the sense of being "no longer at ease." Homi Bhabha describes this in terms of a "third space of enunciation," where identity

emerges at the crossroads of overlapping cultural trajectories (Bhabha 37). The novel's title, drawn from T.S. Eliot's *Journey of the Magi*, further conveys a sense of dislocation and alienation.

Frantz Fanon argues that colonial education instils an inferiority complex in the colonized, leading them to reject their native cultures in favour of Western values. Christianity and missionary education served as tools of colonial exploitation and cultural erasure. The first-generation converts, enthralled by colonial ideology, often became uncritical imitators of their colonizers. Obi's father, Isaac Okonkwo, exemplifies this generation. As a devout Christian, he rejects polygamy, opposes indigenous beliefs, and refuses to acknowledge the resemblance between Obi and his grandfather, Ogbuefi Okonkwo. He even ridicules the belief in traditional deities like the chief rain-maker. Isaac distances himself from his heritage, denouncing non-Christian Igbo as heathens. He forbids his family from accepting food from non-Christians, as shown when Obi refuses a neighbour's yam, declaring, "We don't eat heathen food" (Achebe 45). He also dismisses Nigerian folktales as pagan rituals, prohibiting his wife Hannah from sharing them with their children.

Though Hannah outwardly aligns with the church after Isaac's death, her subconscious resists this cultural displacement. In a dream, she envisions white termites devouring her bed—a symbolic representation of white colonialism eroding the foundation of African identity and fertility. She recounts:

"I dreamt a bad dream, a very bad dream one night. I was lying on a bed spread with white cloth and I felt something creepy against my skin. I looked down on the bed and found that swarm of white termites had eaten it up, and the mat and the white cloth. Yes, termites had eaten up the bed right under me" (Achebe 102).

For the second-generation converts like Obi, the situation becomes more complex. Unlike the unwavering imitation of their predecessors, they experience cultural ambivalence. Obi, moulded by the literary modernism of the European canon, reflects this conflict. His early life is intertwined with books, and his Western education becomes both the catalyst of his cultural transformation and a source of alienation. His betrayal of his parents' world is marked not by outright rejection but by inner conflict and ambiguity. This paper explores how this diffusion of English culture—manifested through language, education, bureaucracy, and social expectations—creates a profound identity crisis in Obi, culminating in his moral and personal downfall.

Theoretical Framework

This study employs postcolonial theory, particularly Homi Bhabha's notions of hybridity and mimicry, and Frantz Fanon's theory of colonial alienation. These frameworks illuminate how colonized subjects internalize foreign values while struggling to maintain their indigenous identity,

leading to a fractured sense of self. The identity crisis experienced by Obi is understood within the context of cultural displacement and the pressures of Western modernity.

Bhabha's Theory of Hybridity and Mimicry

Homi Bhabha is a prominent figure in postcolonial studies, heavily influenced by Western poststructuralists such as Derrida, Lacan, and Foucault. Bhabha's key contribution to postcolonial thought lies in his articulation of *ambivalence* at the site of colonial dominance. In *The Location of Culture*, he introduces concepts such as mimicry, hybridity, and liminality—terms shaped by semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis. For Bhabha, colonialism is not merely a straightforward narrative of oppression and violence; rather, it is a complex site of cultural interaction where the identities of both colonizers and the colonized are formed and transformed.

Significantly, Bhabha highlights the West's anxiety toward its "doubles"—namely, the East—which forces it to reflect upon and justify its own identity and rational self-image. He argues that colonial power relies on the construction of difference, portraying the colonized as inferior. Yet, this difference is continually destabilized by the underlying sameness between colonizers and the colonized, creating a tension that reveals cracks in colonial discourse. These cracks—sites of ambivalence—offer the colonized subtle yet potent opportunities for resistance.

Language plays a critical role in this process. Bhabha develops a linguistic model for anti-colonial agency, using theoretical tools to challenge and dismantle binary oppositions such as Self/Other, centre/margin, civilized/savage, and enlightened/ignorant—binaries which typically privilege one side while marginalizing the other. Influenced by Derrida, he destabilizes these constructs, allowing for cultural transgression and transformation, resulting in hybrid forms. For Bhabha, the idea of a pure or authentic cultural identity is untenable. Instead, cultural identity exists in a liminal, in-between space where different traditions meet and reshape each other.

In fact, not only Bhabha's work, but postcolonial studies in general are preoccupied with these concepts of hybridity, mimicry, in-betweenness, crossing over borders, and others. In his book *Colonial Desires: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Robert Young says:

A hybrid is technically a cross between two different species and that therefore the term hybridization evokes both the botanical notion of inter-species grafting and the 'vocabulary of the Victorian extreme right' which regarded different races as different species (Young 10).

In this case, Young refers to the term hybridity as a cross between two different species, but he further states that it is both a botanical notion as well as an inter-species grafting. Drawing upon this connotation of inter-species grafting, Bhabha's theory of hybridity can be explained by referring to Ania Loomba's book *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*:

It is Homi Bhabha's usage of the concept of hybridity that has been the most controversial within recent postcolonial studies. Bhabha goes back to Fanon to suggest that liminality and hybridity are necessary attributes of the colonial conditions. For Fanon, you will recall, psychic trauma results when the colonial subject realizes that he can never attain the 'whiteness' he has been taught to desire, and neither he can wholly shed the blackness that he has learnt to devalue. Bhabha amplifies this, in order to suggest that the colonial identities are always a matter of flux and agony, and it is always, as Bhabha writes in an essay about Fanon's importance of our time in relation to the place of the other that colonial desire is articulated, correct (Loomba 174).

Importantly, Bhabha diverges from Fanon's view that colonial authority operates by encouraging the colonized to mimic white culture. Instead, he asserts that the invitation to mimic inherently destabilizes colonial power. In *The Location of Culture*, he writes:

"Mimicry emerges as a repetition of difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (Bhabha, 86).

Colonial mimicry, therefore, is not a simple act of imitation or assimilation, but an exaggerated, ambivalent form of copying—"almost the same, but not quite." This duality is most vividly embodied by migrants, who live between cultural worlds, rooted in both their origin and their adopted homes. They exemplify the hybrid, liminal condition Bhabha sees as characteristic of all cultural identity in the postcolonial world.

Franz Fanon's Theory of Colonial Alienation

Frantz Fanon develops a powerful theory of colonial alienation, emphasizing the psychological and cultural fragmentation imposed on the colonized subject. Fanon argues that colonialism systematically dehumanizes the native population, reducing them to an object of domination and stripping them of their cultural identity and agency. This alienation manifests through internalized inferiority, as the colonized internalize the values and norms of the colonizer, leading to self-hatred and disconnection from their own heritage. In *Black Skin, White Masks*, Fanon mentions that the process of alienation occurs when the colonized subject begins to see themselves through the eyes of the colonizer, rejecting their own heritage, language, and identity in favour of the imposed "superior" culture:

"The colonized is elevated above his jungle status in proportion to his adoption of the mother country's cultural standards. He becomes whiter as he renounces his blackness, his jungle" (Fanon 18).

Historical and Cultural Context of *No Longer at Ease*

Set in late colonial Nigeria during the 1950s, *No Longer at Ease* captures a society grappling with impending independence. English culture, represented through language, governance, education,

and religion, had already pervaded key aspects of Nigerian life. Colonial institutions privileged English norms, marginalizing indigenous epistemologies and social structures. For individuals like Obi, sent abroad for higher education, returning home involved navigating conflicting cultural expectations that often led to internal discord.

Colonial Education and Cultural Displacement

Imperial power employs various ideological tools as indirect methods to assert control over colonized nations. According to Althusser's theory, these ideological tools help legitimize the dominance of the ruling class by encouraging people to accept and internalize their subjugation. Institutions such as education, religion, and media play a central role in shaping individuals to become compliant with imperial authority. According to Randall Curren's definition in *Philosophy of Education*, education is primarily understood as the structured guidance and regulation of human activities to improve their methods of learning. He also emphasizes that education entails the transmission of culture (Curren, 3).

Colonialism did not merely exert political control; it deeply penetrated cultural systems. Education became a primary means through which English culture was transmitted to colonized subjects. Obi's education in England, funded by the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU), is emblematic of the colonial system's intent to produce 'interpreters' of Empire—Africans who are sufficiently Westernized to serve colonial administration but remain culturally uprooted. Obi's journey to England represents both a personal achievement and a colonial project: to mould Africans into replicas of the British ruling class. The English education system teaches Obi not only literature and logic but also Eurocentric values that devalue his Igbo heritage. He returns with a degree and a sense of superiority, but also alienation. Achebe portrays how this education, rather than empowering Obi with a balanced worldview, alienates him from his roots:

“The impatient idealism of youth dictated that he should take the whole system by the scruff of the neck and give it a good shaking” (Achebe 82).

While Obi is intellectually moulded by English literary and moral frameworks, his return to Nigeria reveals a disconnect between his Western ideals and the realities of Nigerian society. His alienation becomes most evident in his strained relationship with traditional customs and his parents' Christianity, a vestige of colonial influence that had already begun reshaping indigenous identity. He speaks and thinks in English, and dismisses traditional beliefs as backward. This education distances him from his community's values:

“He was going to be a lawyer and a leader of the people, and yet he felt like a stranger among them” (Achebe 82).

The English curriculum, language, and worldview embedded in Obi's education do not equip him for the lived realities of Nigerian life. His Englishness becomes a liability when he returns home, creating a rift between himself and his society.

Language and Psychological Dislocation

Language plays a central role in the diffusion of English culture. Language in Achebe's novel is both a tool of empowerment and alienation. Obi's proficiency in English is essential to his bureaucratic role but distances him from the cultural authenticity of his roots. His preference for English over Igbo, and his literary tastes (notably his admiration for English poetry), signal his detachment from his roots.

“Obi had read Eliot and Joyce and all the other great masters. He could no longer speak his own language fluently, and he found the customs of his people archaic and sometimes laughable” (Achebe 10).

Achebe subtly mocks Obi's linguistic pretensions; his thoughts are often shaped by English idioms and romantic ideals that contrast sharply with his socio-cultural reality. Achebe deliberately infuses English with Igbo proverbs and idioms to illustrate the hybridized linguistic landscape.

The linguistic divide also underscores Obi's isolation. He is too "English" for the Igbo community and too African for the colonial elite. Franz Fanon in *The Wretched of the Earth* speaks about this psychological fracture—the alienation of the native intellectual or middle class, who finds themselves caught between two incompatible worlds, belonging fully to neither:

The colonized intellectual, at the end of the colonial regime, is a man on the margin of the world, of the colonial world, of his people. He increasingly becomes aware that he is in fact neither European nor truly part of his own people (Fanon 47).

Obi's failure to communicate effectively with both groups deepens his identity crisis, leaving him with no solid ground to stand on. His discomfort with the pidgin and the traditions he once embraced illustrates the cultural chasm widened by colonial education:

“He was no longer at ease among his own people” (Achebe 6).

This linguistic dislocation parallels Obi's psychological dislocation — an identity forged in the crucible of British culture but ill-fitting in his Nigerian context. Nonetheless, English remains the language of power, law, and governance, reinforcing a cultural hierarchy that privileges colonial heritage over native identity.

Identity Crisis as a Postcolonial Condition

Frantz Fanon articulates the mechanisms through which colonialism systematically erases indigenous identities, primarily by marginalizing native customs and enforcing cultural suppression. In his *The Wretched of the Earth*, he emphasizes that the colonial project endeavours to compel the colonized subject to internalize a sense of cultural inferiority, stating:

Every effort is made to bring the colonised person to admit the inferiority of his culture... to recognise the unreality of his 'nation'... (Fanon 171).

This imposed devaluation of indigenous culture often leads native intellectuals to internalize colonial ideologies—manifesting either in the mimicry of the colonizer's cultural norms or in the reduction of their own traditions to essentialized and romanticized forms. Obi's predicament is emblematic of the broader postcolonial identity crisis. He is a product of two worlds: the colonizer and the colonized. His inability to reconcile these identities results in alienation, confusion, and self-destruction. Achebe presents this identity crisis as not only personal but structural—a reflection of Nigeria's struggle to define itself in the aftermath of colonial rule.

Achebe illustrates the concept of cultural hybridity as theorized by Homi Bhabha, where the colonial subject occupies an ambiguous space – neither fully indigenous nor entirely Western. Bhabha's concept of the “third space” (Bhabha 37) is applicable here. Obi inhabits a cultural interstice where meaning is negotiated but never settled. Obi's education in England transforms him into a “stranger” in his homeland. His romantic interest in Clara, an osu (outcast) by Igbo standards, underscores his challenge to tradition using Western rationalism:

“What made an osu different from other men and women? Nothing but the ignorance of their forefathers. Why should they, who had seen the light of the Gospel, remain in that ignorance?” (Achebe 97).

Obi's rejection of traditional arranged marriage, and his love for Clara — a woman deemed an outcast — symbolizes his break with Igbo social customs. Yet societal rejection and personal guilt highlight the limitations of hybridity in achieving cultural synthesis. This in-betweenness renders Obi psychologically unstable. His descent into bribery is not merely a moral failing but a symptom of deeper existential confusion. Obi is caught in a cultural limbo — unable to reconcile the values of his ancestry with the demands of modernity.

The Tragic Resolution: Identity Crisis as Moral Collapse

The heart of Obi's identity crisis lies in the clash between traditional African values and Western individualism. While his parents expect him to uphold Christian and Igbo moral codes, the colonial system he works in demands compliance with an inherently corrupt bureaucratic structure. Obi's eventual descent into bribery is not merely a moral failing but a manifestation of his identity crisis.

His adherence to Western ethical standards isolates him from communal practices that normalize reciprocal obligations. The corruption scandal reflects not only a systemic flaw but also the collapse of Obi's constructed identity. Torn between the rigid legalism of English morality and the pragmatic collectivism of Igbo culture, Obi becomes an emblem of postcolonial disorientation. Obi's descent into bribery — despite his initial resistance — is a metaphor for the collapse of idealism in the face of systemic contradictions. He is neither fully British nor traditionally African. Achebe shows that Obi's identity crisis is not merely personal but symptomatic of a society in transition, grappling with imposed Western institutions that fail to reconcile with indigenous ethics and community life. His fall illustrates how cultural hybridity, when unmoored from rooted values, can lead to moral ambiguity and disintegration.

Achebe critiques both the old and new systems. The traditional elders who fund Obi's education expect him to represent their interests in Lagos, but they are also complicit in the system that demands patronage and corruption. Obi, meanwhile, internalizes English ideals of meritocracy and autonomy, which prove impractical in a society still bound by communal expectations and economic hardship.

Achebe does not romanticize traditional values, nor does he wholly condemn Western ideals. Instead, he shows how the uncritical adoption of foreign norms, without contextual integration, leads to moral fragmentation. Obi's eventual acceptance of a bribe symbolizes the collapse of his hybrid identity.

CONCLUSION

No Longer at Ease masterfully explores the diffusion of English culture and its role in precipitating identity crises in postcolonial Nigeria. Through Obi's tragic arc, Achebe critiques the internal and external conflicts that arise when traditional African values collide with Western ideals. The novel stands as a cautionary tale about the psychological cost of colonial legacy and the urgent need for cultural authenticity in the quest for national identity.

Achebe does not propose a simple return to pre-colonial tradition, but rather calls for a conscious, critical synthesis of values that can sustain a postcolonial identity rooted in both history and modernity. Obi's failure underscores the importance of grounding education and development in the cultural realities of the people they are meant to serve.

REFERENCES

1. Achebe, Chinua. *No Longer at Ease*. Heinemann, 1960.
2. Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. Routledge, 1994.
3. Curren, Randall, editor. *Philosophy of Education: An Anthology*. Blackwell Publishing, 2007.
4. Fanon, Frantz. *Black Skin, White Masks*. Translated by Richard Philcox, Grove Press, 2008.

5. Fanon, Frantz. *The Wretched of the Earth*. Translated by Constance Farrington, Grove Press, 1963.
6. Loomba, Ania. *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*. Routledge, 2015.
7. Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*. Routledge, 1995.