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Burden of Belonging: Cultural Displacement and Identity Crisis in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract

Achebe's No Longer at Ease (1960) portrays the cultural and psychological instability of a Western-educated Nigerian at the threshold of national independence. This article reconsiders Okonkwo's identity crisis through Bhabha's concepts of ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry, and the third space, supplemented by Fanon's account of colonial alienation and Said's critique of colonial discourse. Through qualitative close reading and thematic analysis, the study argues that Obi's downfall cannot be explained adequately as either individual moral weakness or corruption detached from history. His crisis develops through the simultaneous demands of colonial education, bureaucratic modernity, Igbo communal obligation, family authority, language, class aspiration, and personal desire. Existing criticism has examined many of these pressures separately or in selected combinations; this article brings them into a single account of ambivalence as the process through which conflicting cultural and institutional demands become an identity crisis. Obi's relationship with Clara, the osu prohibition, the Umuofia Progressive Union, the colonial civil service, and his financial pressures reveal a subject compelled to negotiate rather than simply choose between cultural worlds. The novel thus represents ambivalence as both personal and historical: Obi's fractured self reflects the contradictions of late-colonial Nigeria, where approaching political independence does not erase inherited hierarchies or colonial institutions.

Keywords: Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*, postcolonial ambivalence, identity crisis, hybridity, Bhabha, colonial education

1. Introduction

Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, published in 1960 as Nigeria approached independence, occupies a particularly important position in African postcolonial writing because it shifts attention from the first encounter with colonialism to the predicament of a generation already shaped by colonial institutions. If *Things Fall Apart* dramatizes the disruption of Igbo society through missionary and administrative penetration, *No Longer at Ease* examines the descendants of that disrupted world. Its protagonist, Obi Okonkwo, returns from England with a university education, a prestigious civil-service position within reach, and an idealistic belief that a new generation of educated Nigerians can overcome corruption. Yet his apparent success quickly becomes unstable. He is at once the pride of Umuofia, an employee of the

colonial bureaucracy, a modern individual who wants to make personal choices, a Christian-raised son, a member of an Igbo community with enduring obligations, and a young man under increasing financial and emotional pressure. Achebe places these roles in conflict rather than harmony.

The novel has consequently attracted readings centered on corruption, modernization, cultural hybridity, education, alienation, and the difficulties of the educated African elite. Earlier and recent criticism shows that Obi's dilemma is not reducible to a single cause. Khan, Ahmed, and Ahmad (2020), for example, describe Obi as culturally hybrid and caught in a state of in-betweenness produced by English colonial influence and Nigerian cultural obligations. Sahed and Serir (2022) similarly emphasize cultural displacement, linguistic ambivalence, and the dilemma of belonging, combining Fanon's work on alienation with Bhabha's concept of the third space. Adkins (2017) approaches the novel through disillusionment, bribery, and the contradictory moral demands placed upon Obi, while Baxter (2019) situates the novel's corruption within the specific pressures of late-colonial administration. More recent studies continue this line of inquiry: Hossan (2024) interprets Western education as a mechanism of cultural dislocation across Achebe's African trilogy, Jonipelliwar (2024) connects education, corruption, alienation, and systemic pressures, and Hoque (2025) focuses explicitly on the diffusion of English culture and identity crisis in *No Longer at Ease*. These studies establish that identity, education, and corruption are interconnected in Achebe's representation of colonial modernity.

Existing scholarship has established the importance of hybridity, cultural displacement, Western education, corruption, and the conflict between tradition and modernity in *No Longer at Ease*. What requires closer integration is the process by which these pressures converge in Obi's identity crisis. This article therefore asks what becomes visible when Obi's corruption is read not as an isolated moral failure but as the late manifestation of a longer cultural and psychological struggle. Achebe's retrospective structure encourages this question because the novel begins with Obi already on trial. The legal outcome is known before the narrative reconstructs the pressures, compromises, hopes, and contradictions that precede it. The central question consequently shifts from whether Obi becomes corrupt to how a highly educated and initially idealistic young man becomes vulnerable to corruption.

Postcolonial ambivalence offers a productive way of answering that question. In Bhabha's account, colonial relations do not produce simple cultural oppositions in which a subject can remain completely inside one identity and reject the other. Colonial power creates imitation, attraction, resistance, hybridity, and contradictory forms of identification (Bhabha, 1994). The colonized subject may seek the social advantages made available through the colonial system while simultaneously resisting its assumptions and experiencing alienation from the culture it rewards. Obi embodies this condition. His education gives him status and mobility, but it also changes the way he understands Nigeria, work, marriage, language, responsibility, and individual freedom. He returns to a community that has invested economically and symbolically in his education, but the very education that makes him valuable to the community also makes some communal expectations appear restrictive to him. His life is therefore marked by the contradiction that the sources of his empowerment are also sources of estrangement.

Fanon's analysis of colonial psychology helps clarify the emotional cost of this condition. Colonial education and cultural hierarchy can produce alienation when the colonized subject is trained to measure value through standards associated with the colonizer while remaining racially and culturally excluded from full identification with that world (Fanon, 1952). Said's account of colonial discourse further explains the representational structure in which Africa is judged as deficient and Europeans claim authority to define the colonized (Said, 1978). Mr. Green's racist insistence that "The African is corrupt through and through" (Achebe, 1960, p. 8) condenses this colonial gaze: Obi's individual failure is converted into evidence of an alleged racial truth. Achebe's narrative, however, dismantles that explanation by showing the history of pressures that precedes the bribe. The novel refuses both Green's racial determinism and an equally reductive moral reading of Obi.

The article addresses three related questions: How does the narrative formulate patterns of ambivalence in Okonkwo's life? How does Achebe stage the tension between colonial modernity and Igbo social expectations? And how do these conflicting pressures contribute to Obi's identity crisis? The corresponding objectives are to analyze ambivalence as a force shaping Obi's identity, to examine the role of hybridity and cultural dislocation in destabilizing belonging, and to show how Achebe links the protagonist's personal crisis with wider colonial and indigenous structures. The central argument is that Obi's identity crisis develops through an unresolved negotiation between Western education and bureaucratic modernity on one side and Igbo communal, familial, religious, and social expectations on the other. His tragedy arises not simply because he belongs to two cultures, but because each sphere makes claims upon him that cannot easily be reconciled. In this sense, the novel transforms an individual fall into a critique of the contradictory social order inherited at the end of colonial rule.

2. Literature Review

Scholarship on *No Longer at Ease* has long recognized that Okonkwo is a figure of transition. The most relevant critical debate for the present study concerns the relationship among cultural hybridity, education, alienation, social obligation, and corruption. Rather than treating these topics as separate themes, the literature increasingly suggests that they are different expressions of the same unstable historical condition.

Bhabha's postcolonial vocabulary has been especially influential in interpretations of cultural mixture. Khan et al. (2020) describe Obi's cultural identity as syncretic, emphasizing his oscillation between English colonial culture and Nigerian social expectations. Their reading foregrounds the interstitial position of a protagonist who acquires the cultural capital of the colonizer but cannot abandon his indigenous attachments. The significance of this argument lies in its recognition that hybridity does not automatically produce a successful synthesis. Obi's mixed position is experienced as tension, instability, and alienation. This is consistent with Bhabha's (1994) broader account of hybridity as a site of negotiation in which cultural authority becomes unstable rather than a harmonious blending of two complete traditions.

Sahed and Serir (2022) move from hybridity toward the affective problem of belonging. They read Obi as a subject caught between African tradition and European modernity and emphasize the combined force of his Umuofian background, English education, and modern urban life in Lagos. Their account is particularly useful because it brings linguistic ambivalence and cultural displacement into the analysis of identity (de)formation. It also demonstrates the value of reading Bhabha alongside Fanon: hybridity explains the cultural in-between, while Fanon helps illuminate the alienation and self-division that accompany colonial acculturation. The present article follows this combined orientation but gives greater emphasis to the way the novel organizes multiple pressures around Obi's social roles: son, community investment, civil servant, Western-educated elite, lover, Christian-raised Igbo man, and aspiring modern individual.

Language is another important dimension of Achebe's ambivalence. Lynn (2017) argues that Achebe's writing does not resolve the question of English versus African languages so much as dramatize the complicated linguistic reality inherited from colonialism. In *No Longer at Ease*, English functions as education, professional access, bureaucracy, and cosmopolitan identity, yet Achebe continually places it beside Igbo expressions, proverbs, speech patterns, and communal forms of meaning. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) famously emphasizes language as a carrier of culture and argues that colonial education reorganizes consciousness through the language of empire. Achebe's practice differs from Ngũgĩ's linguistic program, but the tension identified by Ngũgĩ remains relevant to Obi: English expands his institutional mobility while also marking his distance from local cultural forms. The novel's language therefore supports the broader argument that colonial modernity offers advancement through forms that can simultaneously estrange the subject from inherited worlds.

Recent scholarship has also sharpened the role of education. Hossan (2024), examining Achebe's trilogy, treats Western schooling as an ideological mechanism whose apparent promise of advancement carries the cost of cultural dislocation. In *No Longer at Ease*, the educated elite is not simply liberated by education; it becomes the location where colonial values and indigenous expectations collide. Hoque (2025) similarly argues that English cultural values, education, and bureaucratic systems disrupt indigenous identity and contribute to a fractured sense of self. This recent work reinforces a central point of the present study: Obi's education is fundamentally ambivalent. It is the basis of his prestige and occupational opportunity, but it also helps produce the assumptions through which he judges the people who financed that education.

The critical discussion of corruption complicates purely cultural readings. Adkins (2017) interprets Obi as a frustrated idealist who is torn between the moral and financial demands of rural kin and the expectations of an urban colonial elite. This reading is useful because it restores agency to Obi while refusing to separate his moral failure from the social environment in which it occurs. Baxter (2019) goes further by placing bribery within late-colonial administrative history and the competing demands made upon Nigerian civil servants. Her contextual approach demonstrates that the civil service is not a neutral background to Obi's tragedy: it is an institution where colonial hierarchy, new African professional identities, legality, patronage, and social expectation intersect. Orock (2022) similarly reads *No Longer at Ease* as a representation of elites, corruption, complicity, and early postcolonial decadence, emphasizing Achebe's literary contribution to understanding the political anthropology of the emerging postcolony. Jonipelliwar (2024) explicitly joins education, indebtedness, familial demand, alienation, and systemic corruption, arguing that Obi's moral compromise emerges through compounding social and institutional pressures rather than a single personal defect.

These approaches demonstrate why the corruption plot cannot be detached from identity. Obi's early confidence rests on the belief that educated young Nigerians will transform public life, yet his own social position is dependent on the same colonial and communal structures he imagines himself able to transcend. The Umuofia Progressive Union finances his education and expects repayment, gratitude, representation, and service. The colonial bureaucracy provides status and income but also embeds him within an institution organized through racial and administrative hierarchy. His family expects cultural loyalty, particularly in marriage, while his English education strengthens his attachment to individual choice. The competing expectations do not mechanically cause bribery, but they create the environment in which Obi's moral certainty is progressively eroded.

Taken together, the scholarship supports an integrated reading of identity crisis in the novel. Studies of cultural syncreticity and hybrid identity emphasize that Obi's problem is not that he belongs to two sealed cultures, but that he inhabits a contested social space in which belonging is repeatedly negotiated (Khan et al., 2020; Sahed & Serir, 2022). Work on education and intellectual identity further shows that Western schooling creates mobility while also separating the educated subject from the institutions and communal expectations through which that mobility must be justified. Studies of corruption and late-colonial administration add an institutional dimension: the civil service does not merely test Obi's ethics; it places him inside a hierarchy whose colonial procedures and material pressures contradict its claims to modern rationality (Adkins, 2017; Baxter, 2019). Yet these strands are often discussed as adjacent themes rather than as mutually reinforcing elements of the same identity crisis. The present study addresses that gap by treating ambivalence as the process that connects cultural hybridity, linguistic negotiation, social obligation, educational mobility, and bureaucratic disillusionment. Its contribution is to show how Obi's corruption emerges from a crisis of belonging that is simultaneously psychological, social, institutional, and historical, without removing his responsibility for the choices he makes.

3. Theoretical Framework

3.1 Bhabha: Ambivalence, Hybridity, and the Third Space

The primary theoretical framework of this study is Bhabha's account of ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry, and the third space in *The Location of Culture* (1994). These concepts are used as interpretive tools rather than as fixed categories imposed upon the novel. Bhabha's central insight is that colonial identity is not organized through a simple opposition between a powerful colonizer and a culturally untouched colonized subject. Colonial authority requires repetition and imitation, but that repetition is never complete. The colonized subject is encouraged to acquire the language, habits, education, and institutional forms of the colonizer, while remaining marked as different. Colonial identity is therefore contradictory from the beginning.

Ambivalence describes the simultaneous attraction and resistance generated by this relationship. The colonizer desires a subject who can be educated, disciplined, and made useful to colonial institutions, yet not made fully equivalent to the colonizer. The colonized subject, correspondingly, may value the education, status, and professional mobility associated with colonial modernity while also rejecting its racial hierarchy and its devaluation of indigenous life. Obi's career makes this contradiction unusually visible. His British education and civil-service position identify him as one of the new elite produced through colonial systems. He believes in professional competence and individual merit, but he also resents European condescension and imagines himself as part of a generation that will transform Nigeria. At the same time, he often views communal expectations through assumptions acquired from Western individualism. His ambivalence is therefore directed both outward and inward: toward colonial culture, toward Umuofia, and toward his own changing self.

Hybridity describes the cultural forms that emerge from such encounters. It should not be understood here as a stable fifty-fifty mixture of "African" and "European" identities. Bhabha's third space suggests instead that cultural meaning is produced through negotiation, translation, and displacement. Obi cannot return from England as if he had never left, but neither can he become simply English. His life after return is an interstitial life: he uses English institutional knowledge within Nigeria, participates in Igbo social networks while criticizing some of their rules, and seeks individual freedom while depending materially and symbolically on communal support. The third space is therefore helpful because it explains why the demand that Obi choose one pure identity is itself misleading. The problem is not merely that he has two identities; it is that the historical conditions of colonial Nigeria have made both identities relational and unstable.

3.2 Mimicry and Colonial Modernity

Mimicry further clarifies Obi's institutional position. Colonial education produces subjects capable of functioning within the state, but that apparent similarity also exposes the incompleteness of colonial authority. Obi can occupy a professional position, speak the language of administrative efficiency, and present himself as the rational modern civil servant. Yet Mr. Green's racial assumptions reveal that colonial institutions do not recognize such similarity as equality. Obi's education can therefore be read as both access and containment. It enables upward mobility while placing him inside a system where European authority continues to judge African competence and morality.

3.3 Fanon: Colonial Alienation and Psychological Dislocation

Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952) supplements Bhabha by emphasizing the psychological consequences of colonial hierarchy. Fanon examines how the colonized subject may internalize standards that render the colonizer's culture prestigious and the indigenous self deficient. His account is particularly useful for understanding alienation: the desire to enter the world of colonial modernity does not

guarantee acceptance within it, and the subject may become estranged from the cultural world from which he comes. Obi's return to Nigeria dramatizes precisely this problem. England has changed the terms through which he perceives home. The result is not simply cosmopolitan enrichment but a loss of ease—the inability to inhabit either cultural position without conflict.

3.4 Said: Colonial Discourse and Representation

Said's *Orientalism* (1978) is used more selectively to illuminate colonial representation and authority. Although Said's primary archive differs from Achebe's Nigerian setting, his account of how colonial discourse defines non-European peoples as objects of knowledge is relevant to Mr. Green's language and to the broader hierarchy of the colonial administration. Green's racial explanation of corruption converts a complex political and institutional problem into an alleged African essence. Achebe's narrative method counters this discourse by restoring history, motive, contradiction, and social context to Obi. The novel does not excuse Obi, but it refuses the colonial privilege of explaining him through stereotype.

3.5 Integrating the Theoretical Framework

Taken together, these theorists provide a framework for reading identity crisis as culturally and psychologically produced. Bhabha remains central because ambivalence links the novel's opposing attractions and obligations; Fanon clarifies the alienation produced by colonial hierarchy; and Said helps identify the discourse through which colonial power interprets African subjects. The framework does not claim that every element of Obi's tragedy is caused by colonialism. His choices matter, as do indigenous hierarchies such as the *osu* prohibition and the expectations of family and community. The theoretical purpose is instead to show how personal agency operates within a historically contradictory field in which colonial and indigenous institutions simultaneously shape what choices are possible, respectable, or costly.

4. Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, interpretive research design based on close textual analysis of Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. The novel is treated as the primary text, while postcolonial theory and selected literary criticism provide the conceptual and scholarly context for interpretation. The method is appropriate because the research questions concern patterns of cultural ambivalence, identity formation, social obligation, and psychological dislocation as they are represented through narrative situations, characterization, dialogue, and institutional encounters.

The analysis proceeds thematically. Passages and narrative episodes are selected because they illuminate recurring problems central to the study: ambivalence, hybridity, colonial education, cultural dislocation, language, family and communal expectation, social mobility, the Clara relationship, bureaucratic life, and psychological instability. Particular attention is given to moments where Obi's roles conflict—for example, his return from England, his relationship with the Umuofia Progressive Union, his response to the *osu* prohibition, his civil-service idealism, his debts, and his eventual involvement in bribery. These episodes are read primarily through Bhabha's concepts of ambivalence and hybridity, with Fanon and Said used as supporting perspectives where alienation and colonial representation become especially relevant.

The article also compares its interpretation with scholarship on the novel, especially studies of hybridity, belonging, education, language, tradition and modernity, and colonial administration. These sources are used to position the close reading within the existing debate rather than to treat secondary criticism as a substitute for textual evidence. The method is therefore interpretive and qualitative: claims are developed from recurring narrative situations, dialogue, imagery, and institutional encounters, then tested against converging and competing critical arguments. Attention is given to the limits of the evidence, particularly where scholarship generalizes from the novel's corruption plot or treats tradition

and modernity as fixed opposites. This approach allows the analysis to retain both sides of Achebe's design: Obi is responsible for his decisions, but those decisions are made within structures that distribute obligation, opportunity, and judgment unevenly.

5. Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Return, Hybridity, and the Loss of Cultural Ease

Obi's return from England is the decisive condition of his postcolonial ambivalence. He comes back with a transformed consciousness but enters a social world that has already invested heavily in the meaning of his return. For the Umuofia Progressive Union, his education is not private self-development. It is a collective achievement financed through communal sacrifice and expected to produce service, prestige, repayment, and representation. Obi therefore returns not simply as an individual but as a social symbol. The community welcomes an "illustrious son" (Achebe, 1960, p. 31), while Obi increasingly imagines himself through the language of personal choice, professional merit, and modern individuality. The gap between these two understandings of education establishes the central conflict of the novel.

Achebe makes the changed relation to home explicit when the narrator observes, "It was in England that Nigeria first became more than just a name to him. That was the first great thing that England did for him" (Achebe, 1960, p. 16). The irony is central to Obi's hybridity: distance from Nigeria intensifies his national consciousness, yet the same English experience also alters the standards through which he judges the society to which he returns.

This conflict closely resembles Bhabha's third space. Obi cannot occupy an untouched Igbo identity because his years in England have altered how he interprets work, marriage, corruption, and authority. Yet he cannot inhabit a fully Western identity either. His position in the colonial civil service remains racially structured, and his social life continues to depend on Nigerian networks, kinship, and community. The result is not a stable synthesis but an identity formed through constant negotiation. Khan et al. (2020) identify this as cultural syncreticity, while Sahed and Serir (2022) describe the corresponding anxiety of belonging. The novel, however, gives this condition a tragic temporal form: Obi initially believes that education has equipped him to act freely, but each subsequent conflict reveals how limited that freedom is.

His attitude toward Nigeria after England shows the paradox. Distance has made the country newly meaningful to him, but the Nigeria he imagines abroad cannot be reconciled easily with the Nigeria he encounters on return. This is one reason the title *No Longer at Ease* is so important. The loss of ease is not simply homesickness in reverse; it is a changed relation to home itself. Obi returns with cultural expectations that make some local practices appear irrational, yet his emotional and material life remains tied to those practices. Fanon's account of colonial alienation helps clarify this condition: colonial education changes not only what the subject knows but the standards by which the subject evaluates self and society (Fanon, 1952). Obi's education gives him a language of reform, but it also produces distance from the world whose reform he imagines.

Achebe does not romanticize either side of the conflict. Igbo communal life supplies belonging, memory, obligation, and support, but it also contains hierarchies that constrain personal choice. Colonial modernity supplies education, professional mobility, and an ideal of bureaucratic impartiality, but it remains organized through racial hierarchy and social exclusion. Obi's identity crisis therefore cannot be resolved by "returning" to tradition or by becoming more fully Western. Both cultural fields are already entangled. This is why hybridity in the novel should be understood as a condition of instability rather than celebratory multiculturalism.

5.2 Colonial Education, Social Mobility, and Ambivalent Modernity

Education is the novel's clearest symbol of colonial ambivalence. Obi's academic success appears to offer a path from provincial life to national influence. The UPU finances his overseas education because it understands schooling as collective advancement; the colonial state values his qualification because it needs educated African personnel; Obi values it because it promises autonomy, prestige, and the capacity to modernize public life. The same institution therefore carries three different meanings. These meanings initially appear compatible, but the narrative gradually exposes their conflict.

The novel first presents colonial education as unmistakable achievement: "At the end of five years he passed the Cambridge School Certificate with distinction in all eight subjects" (Achebe, 1960, p. 12). This academic distinction helps explain why both Obi and Umuofia invest such confidence in education. Yet the narrative gradually exposes the gap between educational success, cultural belonging, and the practical demands of late-colonial life.

Hossan (2024) argues that Western education in Achebe's trilogy functions not as a neutral instrument of enlightenment but as a mechanism of cultural dislocation. That formulation is especially persuasive in Obi's case because his education is simultaneously real empowerment and a source of estrangement. He returns with the cultural capital necessary to enter a professional class that most members of his community cannot access. Yet his education also helps produce the assumptions through which he distances himself from the very community that financed it. Hoque (2025) similarly emphasizes the disruptive role of English cultural values, education, and bureaucracy in the formation of a fractured self. What Achebe adds is irony: the community seeks education as a strategy for collective advancement, but the educated subject produced by that strategy develops an increasingly individual conception of life.

The contradiction is visible in Obi's early views of corruption. He believes that the replacement of older officials by university-educated young men will transform the civil service. His confidence rests on a modernizing narrative in which education produces rational, ethical, merit-based administration. Yet his own career demonstrates that corruption cannot be explained merely by the educational level of individual officials. The civil servant is embedded in a network of expectations: relatives seek assistance, community members treat office as a collective resource, status generates new expenses, and the colonial state itself is structured by inequality and condescension. Baxter (2019) is therefore right to place bribery within the competing demands made upon young Nigerian administrators. The irony of Obi's fall is that it disproves his original theory without validating Mr. Green's racial stereotype.

Social mobility is similarly double-edged. Obi's salary, car, flat, and status mark his entrance into an elite, but they also generate expenses and expectations that make his position precarious. Mobility brings him closer to the colonial professional class while increasing the economic distance between him and ordinary members of his community. At the same time, that distance does not release him from communal obligation. The UPU expects repayment of his loan; family responsibilities continue; social prestige requires expenditure; and personal crises intensify his financial vulnerability. His upward movement therefore produces not independence but a new structure of dependence.

This helps explain why identity and economy should not be separated in the novel. Obi's financial problems are not merely practical obstacles placed alongside cultural conflict. They reveal the material form of his divided social identity. To be the successful Western-educated son requires one pattern of consumption and professional behavior; to remain the responsible son of Umuofia requires another set of obligations. The two roles compete for the same limited income. The resulting pressure does not remove moral agency, but it shows that identity has material costs. Obi's eventual corruption emerges within a social position that is prestigious but structurally unstable.

5.3 Community, Family, Religion, and the Burden of Representation

The Umuofia Progressive Union is one of Achebe's most important devices for dramatizing the relationship between individual identity and collective expectation. The Union's investment in Obi means that his education is never solely his own. He represents communal hope in the colonial system. His success confirms the value of collective sacrifice; his conduct reflects upon Umuofia; and his career is expected to benefit others. This expectation conflicts sharply with the individualism Obi has acquired through Western education.

The Union President turns Obi's achievement into collective property when he declares, "We are happy that today we have such an invaluable possession in the person of our illustrious son and guest of honor" (Achebe, 1960, p. 31). The wording is revealing: Obi is not simply welcomed as an individual graduate but valued as a communal "possession," a representative whose education carries obligations to the group that financed him.

The conflict becomes especially visible in his responses to community ceremonies and advice. His habits, dress, speech, and attitudes do not always conform to the forms through which the community expects respect to be displayed. These moments may appear minor compared with the corruption plot, but they reveal how ambivalence is lived in everyday behavior. Obi does not reject Umuofia completely. He continues to participate in its networks and remains emotionally tied to family and community. Yet he is increasingly uncomfortable with the expectation that collective authority should govern private decisions.

Even dress becomes a sign of this representational burden. At the reception, the narrator remarks, "Obi's mistake Number One. Everybody expected a young man from England to be impressively turned out" (Achebe, 1960, p. 31). The comic detail exposes a serious contradiction: the community expects the returned student to display the prestige of England even while it also expects him to remain recognizably answerable to Umuofian values.

Family intensifies this tension because its claims are simultaneously emotional, moral, religious, and cultural. Obi's father represents a Christianized Igbo household whose values themselves are products of colonial encounter. This is important because the novel does not present a simple opposition between "traditional Igbo" parents and a "modern Western" son. Isaac Okonkwo's Christianity already shows that the family is culturally transformed. The conflict over Clara therefore emerges within a hybrid social order, not between two pure civilizations. Christianity may lead Isaac to reject some indigenous practices, yet it does not dissolve the social stigma attached to *osu* status. The result illustrates Bhabha's point that colonial cultural transformation does not replace one coherent system with another; it generates uneven combinations and contradictions.

The pressure on Obi is intensified by the fact that family obligation is linked to gratitude. His education and social rise are understood as the outcome of sacrifices made by others. To refuse communal advice can therefore appear not merely independent but ungrateful. Obi's desire to define himself autonomously is consequently haunted by debt in both economic and moral senses. This is one reason his crisis cannot be understood only as a clash between abstract cultural values. The conflict is embodied in relationships with people who have supported him and whose claims upon him cannot simply be dismissed.

At the same time, Achebe refuses to idealize communal authority. The community's expectations can become coercive, and its investment in education may reproduce the very status hierarchy it hopes to overcome. Obi is valued partly because he has acquired credentials recognized by the colonial system. Umuofia's pride in him therefore demonstrates the reach of colonial standards into indigenous social life. The community resists colonial domination while also seeking advancement through colonial institutions. Ambivalence, in other words, characterizes not only Obi but the social world around him.

5.4 Clara, the Osu Prohibition, and the Limits of Modern Individualism

Obi's relationship with Clara provides the most concentrated test of his belief in personal autonomy. Clara is an educated Nigerian woman whose osu status makes marriage unacceptable to Obi's family and community. The conflict is central because Obi initially treats the prohibition as an irrational survival that modern education should enable him to reject. His position appears principled: he believes that individual choice and affection should matter more than inherited social stigma. Yet the narrative shows that holding this belief intellectually is different from sustaining it under family pressure, emotional strain, and social consequence.

The community's language makes clear how quickly educational investment becomes a claim over Obi's private decisions: "We paid eight hundred pounds to train him in England," one speaker complains, "But instead of being grateful he insults us because of a useless girl" (Achebe, 1960, p. 10). The remark reduces Clara to an obstacle to communal expectation and links Obi's choice of partner to a perceived failure of gratitude, showing how economic debt, cultural authority, and intimate life become inseparable.

Clara's marginalization arises from osu status within Igbo social hierarchy, not from a racial category imported by colonial rule. The distinction matters because it demonstrates that postcolonial identity conflict is not produced only by European colonial categories. Indigenous structures of exclusion also constrain the modern subject. Achebe therefore complicates any interpretation in which colonialism alone explains Obi's crisis. Obi's Westernized rejection of the osu prohibition may be ethically attractive, but his inability to negotiate the social consequences of that rejection reveals the limits of his individualism.

The relationship also exposes a gendered dimension of Obi's crisis. Clara bears consequences that Obi does not experience in the same way, especially in relation to pregnancy, abortion, marriageability, and social judgment. Her situation shows that the pressures surrounding identity and cultural belonging are distributed unequally. Obi wants to act as a self-determining modern subject, but his choices are embedded in gendered social relations and collective structures he cannot simply declare obsolete. The Clara episode therefore intensifies the article's central argument: modern individualism cannot be understood apart from the social costs imposed on the people with whom that individualism is negotiated.

The breakdown of the relationship deepens his psychological dislocation. It coincides with family conflict, his mother's illness and death, financial pressure, and growing professional strain. These events should not be treated as independent plot points. Achebe accumulates them to show how identity crisis becomes materially and emotionally exhausting. Obi's ideals are not overturned in one moment; they are worn down through repeated encounters in which every available choice appears to violate another obligation.

Fanon's account of alienation is useful here because Obi's crisis involves a divided relation to value. He has learned to associate modernity with individual choice, education, rationality, and professional independence, yet he remains emotionally bound to family and community. When those values conflict, he cannot preserve both without loss. The resulting ambivalence is not indecision in a trivial sense. It is the condition of a subject whose moral language has been formed by overlapping systems of authority.

5.5 Language and Cultural Negotiation

Language reinforces this divided condition. English is the language of Obi's higher education, bureaucratic employment, and cosmopolitan social identity. It gives him access to institutional power, but it also marks participation in a colonial order. Ngũgĩ (1986) emphasizes that colonial language carries cultural memory and systems of value, while Lynn (2017) shows that Achebe's own use of English remains deliberately

ambivalent. Achebe does not simply reject English; he reshapes it through Igbo idiom, proverb, rhythm, and cultural reference.

This linguistic strategy parallels Obi's identity. He is not simply an English-speaking Nigerian who has lost Igbo culture, nor an unchanged Igbo subject who happens to speak English. His speech and thought move across cultural registers. Different settings require different performances, and these performances are tied to power. Formal English is associated with bureaucratic prestige; communal speech carries forms of belonging and obligation; Nigerian varieties of English and pidgin signal other social relationships. The novel's linguistic plurality therefore makes cultural negotiation audible.

For Obi, however, linguistic competence does not guarantee cultural ease. The very mastery that gives him professional authority can intensify his distance from the expectations of Umuofia. His education teaches him to interpret some communal practices through an external vocabulary of progress and backwardness. Said's analysis of colonial discourse is relevant here because colonial power operates not only through institutions but through categories that define what counts as rational, civilized, modern, or primitive (Said, 1978). Achebe's narrative destabilizes these categories by showing contradictions within both colonial and indigenous worlds.

The language question therefore supports the larger argument: identity crisis is produced through a network of cultural practices rather than a single psychological defect. Obi's ability to inhabit multiple linguistic and cultural spaces is a form of competence, yet it also exposes him to conflicting systems of evaluation. His hybridity expands his range of movement while making stable belonging more difficult.

5.6 Bureaucracy, Corruption, and Psychological Dislocation

The civil service is the institutional setting in which Obi's cultural ambivalence acquires political consequences. At the beginning of his career, he imagines bureaucratic professionalism as a means of national renewal. Education, merit, and ethical administration appear capable of replacing the corruption he associates with an older generation. This ideal makes his later acceptance of bribes particularly significant, but the novel deliberately complicates the moral trajectory.

Before becoming implicated in the system he condemns, Obi confidently diagnoses its problem: "The civil service is corrupt because of these so-called experienced men at the top" (Achebe, 1960, p. 21). The statement captures his reformist self-image and makes his later fall more ironic. He initially locates corruption outside himself, in an older administrative order, but the novel subsequently demonstrates that education alone cannot insulate him from the pressures operating within that order.

Mr. Green's judgment that "The African is corrupt through and through" (Achebe, 1960, p. 8) offers the simplest possible explanation: corruption is racial essence. Achebe's entire narrative functions as a rebuttal to that claim. By moving backward from the trial to the circumstances of Obi's life, the novel reconstructs corruption as a historical and social process. Orock (2022) notes that Achebe's fiction offers a rich account of elites, complicity, and the emerging postcolony; Baxter (2019) emphasizes the competing demands placed on civil servants within late-colonial administration; and Adkins (2017) highlights Obi's position between rural kinship demands and urban elite culture. These readings demonstrate that the legal category of bribery cannot exhaust the meaning of Obi's fall.

Nevertheless, contextualization should not become exoneration. Obi repeatedly makes choices, and Achebe does not remove his responsibility. His tragedy depends upon the distance between his ideals and his actions. The stronger interpretation is therefore relational: structural and cultural pressures make corruption increasingly thinkable and materially tempting, while Obi's decisions convert pressure into misconduct. This balance is important because a purely structural reading would reproduce the

determinism that the novel resists in Mr. Green, merely replacing racial inevitability with social inevitability.

Psychologically, the movement toward corruption is preceded by exhaustion, loss, and the repeated failure of the identities Obi has tried to sustain. His idealism depends on the belief that education can produce an ethically autonomous modern subject, yet his salary and status are already entangled with the Union's financial claims, family obligations, and the cost of urban life. The bureaucratic setting intensifies rather than resolves this contradiction: colonial administration presents itself as rational and impartial while reproducing racialized judgments and material inequalities (Baxter, 2019). Obi's eventual acceptance of bribes remains an ethical failure, but the novel frames it as a compromised response to pressures that his education has not taught him to reconcile. In this sense, corruption is not an alternative to identity crisis; it is one of the forms that the crisis takes when ambivalence is converted into expediency.

The novel's framing at the trial intensifies this point. The judge is astonished that a man of Obi's "education and brilliant promise" could fall so far (Achebe, 1960, p. 7). The phrase reveals the ideology attached to education: qualification is assumed to produce moral modernity. Achebe dismantles that assumption by showing the gap between educational capital and the actual social conditions in which the educated subject must live. Education may give Obi principles, vocabulary, and professional opportunity, but it does not remove economic debt, communal expectation, institutional inequality, grief, or cultural conflict.

The scene then turns judgment into psychological exposure: "I cannot comprehend how a young man of your education and brilliant promise could have done this." Achebe immediately adds, "Treacherous tears came into Obi's eyes. He brought out a white handkerchief and rubbed his face. But he did it as people do when they wipe sweat" (Achebe, 1960, p. 7). His attempt to disguise the tears condenses the conflict between the composed, educated public self he has tried to perform and the shame, grief, and fractured belonging that the trial finally makes visible.

Jonipelliwar (2024) is particularly relevant because the study joins education, indebtedness, familial demand, alienation, and the civil apparatus rather than isolating corruption. The present reading places those pressures within the article's central concept of ambivalence. Obi wants the benefits of his social position while rejecting some of the obligations attached to it; he wants communal belonging without communal control; he wants bureaucratic authority without colonial hierarchy; he wants personal freedom without relational loss. These desires are understandable individually but difficult to sustain simultaneously. The accumulation of contradictions makes his identity increasingly unstable.

5.7 Identity Crisis and the Late-Colonial Nigerian Condition

Obi's crisis acquires its largest significance when read as part of Nigeria's historical transition. The novel appeared in the year of independence but is largely situated in the late-colonial order. This timing matters because political change is approaching while social institutions remain marked by colonial hierarchy and older communal systems retain authority. Obi's life is located precisely at this intersection. He represents a generation expected to become the administrators, professionals, and leaders of a new nation, yet the structures through which that generation is formed are inherited from colonial rule.

Adkins (2017) reads Obi's disillusionment in relation to the high promises attached to independence, while Orock (2022) situates Achebe's representation within the emergence of the African postcolony. These perspectives help explain why Obi's personal crisis resonates beyond biography. His failure does not symbolically "prove" that Nigeria itself must fail, but it dramatizes the difficulty of producing national modernity through institutions and cultural categories that remain internally contradictory.

The same ambivalence appears in the relationship between tradition and modernity. The novel refuses the assumption that modernization requires the disappearance of community. Umuofia's solidarity makes Obi's education possible, demonstrating the productive capacity of communal organization. Yet communal authority can also constrain private choice, as the Clara episode shows. Similarly, colonial education creates genuine intellectual and professional opportunities while carrying alienating assumptions. Modernity and tradition therefore cannot be assigned simple moral values. Each contains resources and constraints, and Obi's identity crisis emerges because he experiences both at once.

This is the deepest reason corruption functions as more than a social theme. Obi's bribe is the point at which the contradictions of his position become visible in action. He has been asked to embody too many incompatible ideals: the grateful communal son, autonomous modern individual, incorruptible civil servant, successful elite professional, loyal family member, culturally authentic Igbo man, Christian-raised subject, and reform-minded nationalist. No single identity can satisfy all these demands. The novel's tragedy lies in his inability to develop a sustainable negotiated self from them.

Bhabha's ambivalence therefore provides a better description of Obi than the language of simple cultural betrayal. He does not abandon one culture and adopt another; he lives within overlapping cultural fields that have already transformed one another. Fanon clarifies why such a position can become psychologically alienating, while Said helps expose the colonial discourse that misreads the resulting instability as evidence of African deficiency. Achebe's counter-narrative restores complexity. Obi remains responsible for his conduct, but his conduct becomes intelligible only when the reader recognizes the historical and social contradictions through which his identity has been formed.

In this sense, *No Longer at Ease* is an identity novel as much as a corruption novel. Its enduring force lies in the way it connects the private and the historical. Obi's debts, love, family disputes, professional aspirations, language, and moral compromises are personal experiences, but they are organized by institutions and cultural structures produced through colonial encounter. His identity crisis thus becomes a narrative form for the late-colonial Nigerian condition: a society moving toward political independence while still negotiating what cultural, institutional, and ethical independence might mean.

6. Conclusion

This study concludes that Okonkwo's identity crisis in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* develops through persistent postcolonial ambivalence rather than through a simple opposition between African tradition and Western modernity. British education gives Obi intellectual confidence, professional mobility, and a language of reform, but it also creates cultural distance; the Umuofia Progressive Union offers belonging and collective support while converting achievement into debt and representation; the colonial civil service promises rational modern administration while remaining marked by hierarchy, patronage, and racial judgment. The conflict over Clara and the osu prohibition further demonstrates that Obi's crisis cannot be attributed to colonial structures alone, since indigenous social hierarchies also restrict personal autonomy. Across these overlapping pressures, hybridity does not become a comfortable synthesis. Instead, Obi repeatedly negotiates incompatible expectations as educated professional, communal son, Christian-raised Igbo man, lover, reformist, and aspiring modern individual. His eventual corruption therefore emerges as the moral and material expression of a longer crisis of belonging, even though the pressures surrounding him do not remove his responsibility for the choices he makes.

Bhabha's concepts of ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry, and the third space provide the study's principal vocabulary for understanding this unstable subject position; Fanon clarifies its psychological cost, while Said helps expose the colonial discourse that reduces complex African experience to racial stereotype. Read through this framework, Obi's personal collapse also reflects the contradictions of late-colonial Nigeria, where political transition approaches without automatically resolving inherited institutions, cultural divisions, or competing claims of community and individualism. Achebe neither romanticizes

indigenous tradition nor celebrates Western modernity, and he refuses both Mr. Green's racial determinism and any interpretation that simply excuses Obi. The novel's lasting significance lies in this balance: identity is historically produced and relational, but agency still matters. Obi is "no longer at ease" because the cultural worlds, institutions, and loyalties that shape him cannot be separated cleanly, and because he never succeeds in transforming their tensions into a sustainable sense of self.

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