

Bending Society or Being Bent by Society: Understanding Obi Okonkwo's Homecoming in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

(A Paper Presented by Christian Anieke on the Occasion of the Homecoming Organized by the Department of English, University of Nigeria Nsukka)

(Protocol)

I welcome each of you to this special homecoming. This homecoming evokes fresh memories of the return of Obi Okonkwo after his studies overseas. A few weeks ago as I reflected on the meaning of our homecoming, images of all shapes and colours raced across the variegated landscape of my mind. I tried to recollect the faces of my classmates, some of whom I had never had the blessing of seeing since we left this department. I tried to imagine what the faces would look like. Questions of all levels of complication jostled for attention like a restless child. Has he got wrinkles on his face now? Has his tummy grown so big that in the night he could be mistaken for a pregnant woman? Has his hair turned white so that one might mistake him for a tree in a snow landscape of a winter night? Or has all his hair disappeared like mine in a hot oven of research and epistemic enquiries? Has she lost that slim figure that turned eyes each time she entered the lecture room, making many lose concentration, even if only momentarily? Has she turned into one indescribable round object so that one might be tempted to use her for a ladder to climb and pluck some fruit? Is he happy? Is she happy and gainfully employed? Questions and questions, naughty, stupid, rational, irrational, tugging at the fringes of the mind like a curious child. But in my usual adventurous style I allowed these thoughts to run their course uncensored.

In the thickest of all these myriads of questions, my adventurous mind slumped into an interesting story about Obi Okonkwo's homecoming. Obi Okonkwo comes home after four years of studying English in England. During the journey back home he gets to know the nurse Clara who also studied in England and whom he had met once at the N.C.N.C. dance in London. Back home in Nigeria the two begin a love affair. This affair is to cause a major problem between Obi and the

Umuofia Progressive Union. The Umuofia Progressive Union in Lagos had raised eight hundred pounds to pay for Obi's studies in England. They expect him to pay this money back so that it could be used for more scholarships. Besides, the Union count it a big blessing that one of their sons will now be part of the "been-tos", with a good government job. However, Obi turns out, in their opinion, to be a terrible disappointment. To add insult to injury he decides to marry an osu, Clara. The Union tries to stop him, but fruitlessly. Obi comes home with all the high ideals of a been-to. But then the hard realities of living in two worlds begin to hit him hard in the face. As secretary to the Scholarship Board he refuses to bow down to a cascade of corrupt offers being made to him. But then Obi Okonkwo gradually sinks into a swamp of debts. There are electric bills to be paid; school fees of his younger brother cannot wait; his old parents at home need his financial support; and there is the eight hundred pounds owed the Umuofia Progressive Union to be cleared. As if this mountain of debts was not enough, Obi loses the fifty pounds he has borrowed from Clara to settle some of his debts.

Furthermore, his insistence on marrying an osu has alienated Obi from his kinsmen in Lagos. Obi's difficulty gets even much more complicated after his parents' refusal to give their blessing to the marriage. For his mother, marrying Clara can only take place over her dead body. On returning to Lagos after the horrifying home visit where he meets an impish confrontation over the issue of Clara, Obi loses any hope of marrying Clara. He persuades her to abort his child she is carrying, having made up his mind to throw in the towel in the face of paternal cum maternal crippling opposition to his marital choice. The abortion finally kills and buries any hope still remaining of marrying Clara. On top of all that his mother dies. Confused, deeply in debt and finding no hope of escaping from all manners of debilitating woes, Obi finally succumbs to the temptation of bribery. He is arrested when he accepts twenty pounds marked by the police to rope him in, and sentenced. "Everybody wondered why. The learned judge, as we have seen, could not comprehend how an educated young man and so on and so forth. The British

Council man, even the men of Umuofia, did not know. And we must presume that, in spite of his certitude, Mr. Green did not know either.”

Today I ask myself some hard questions:

1. What if Obi Okonkwo had scorned the primitive caste system called Osu and gone ahead to marry Clara? First the idea of aborting the child could never have entered his brain. Second, Obi could have kept his relationship with his heartthrob, Clara. Third, he could have become the Beowulf of his people and could have led them to annihilate the Grendels of a putrefying social structure that is erected on a sickening foundation of obnoxious human segregation and degradation. He could have been that enlightened mind, the social conscience of his people, and the critic of a social arrangement that laughs at civility and modernity. And this is what education could have transformed his mind into. I believe that an educated person is someone who has studied the wisdom of humanity expressed in books and electronic devices of all shapes and sizes and has a wider view of life and society than others who do not have the opportunity to be well educated. University education especially raises the consciousness of the recipient to seek the underlying causes of events and to find solutions and answers which go beyond coach-potato mythic explanations. This explains why a university graduate cannot give in to such cheap fallacies as *argumentum ad populum* or *argumentum ad antiquitatem*. A university graduate must maintain refreshing openness to new ideas and independent inquiry so that he or she can sometimes swim against the current of socio-political putrefaction.
2. What if Obi Okonkwo had ridiculed the tempting, serpentine apple of corruption with all its glittering promises? Obi Okonkwo is like many of us after our graduation. Only God knows how many ideas filled the garden of our minds as we dropped our pen in this department. Only God knows the depth of the gap between those ideas and the reality now. Only the heavens know other

ideas that crept into the innermost chambers of our mind in the course of our work, further studies and life-journey. As we reflect on those ideas we may catch ourselves smiling like a young girl who has taken alcohol for the first time to prove that she has come of age. Obi Okonkwo returns from his studies with a Kilimanjaro of ideas and ideals. At the beginning he sticks to his gun and cannot imagine being bent by a society he must save. He holds out like a lone tree against a stupefying desert hurricane. But then as the tempo of the storm increases and its bombardment of the tree reverberates like the US Mother of All Bombs (MOAB), the tree bends. Okonkwo bows under the heavy storm of corruption and corrupt people, the type for which the British Prime Minister David Cameron invented an unforgettable expression: “fantastically corrupt”. Obi Okonkwo is arrested in an EFCC-like trap and is blood-chillingly humiliated. If Obi Okonkwo had continued to stand against the storm, he might have been able to break it and change its course or avowed destructive mission. Obi Okonkwo could have begun an Arab-Spring-like revolution that might have redefined nationhood and socio-political life. This is what education is meant to do. If educated people cannot change their society, why waste tremendous resources on institutions and humans?

Dear friends, colleagues, ladies and gentlemen, I do not know how each of you has fared in the journey of life since you left this department. What this homecoming has done is to remind me of the homecoming of Obi Okonkwo and to raise questions about my own life and colours of experience I have gathered. What has become very clear to me is that it is a special privilege to have passed through this department. (My experience in the U.K.). This explains why we must support this department to build the type of infrastructure that will enhance the academic work of staff and students. Every year the best graduating student of this department gets 300 thousand naira from my foundation. And this will continue ad infinitum. I invite all of you to support this department, its staff, students and projects. This

department remains the academic home to which we must always return with some sense of pride. It is indeed a privilege to have passed through this department.

Today, ladies and gentlemen, as I reflect on the burden the golden privilege of studying here places on my shoulders as a human being and as a priest, I ask myself : Am I going to bend my society restoratively or allow my society to bend me irredeemably? My success must be measured on how much I have done to use the power of knowledge and the linguistic tools acquired in this department and in the course of my epistemic adventure to give my society a desirable face, and an admirable pattern? And here I rest my case!

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