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Africans Serving Empire: Joyce Cary's Mister Johnson And Chinua Achebe's No Longer At Ease

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Abstract

Twenty years span Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* (1939) and Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* (1960), two novels which focus on African agents of Empire who fail to meet the demands of official duty in the colony. As a man who spent part of his life serving Britain in West Africa, and who claimed knowledge of terrain and people, Joyce Cary has none the less been taken to task by Achebe, among others, for his allegedly Euro-centred and distorted picture of Africa.

Much has been written to vindicate Cary's portrait of Africans as realistic and trustworthy, though with signifiers that corresponded with the spirit of colonial times. But Achebe's adamant position regarding *Mister Johnson* was in the form a first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), followed by a number of critical pronouncements. Yet, it seems that Achebe's consistency with his anti-colonial stance flagged when it came to the publication of his second novel *No Longer at Ease*. Indeed, his young protagonist Obi, much like Cary's *Mister Johnson*, undergoes a series of mishaps which make him break the law of a "renewed" Nigeria still under the control of the British Crown. However tragic the circumstances in which he is placed, against his initial ideal to rid his country of corruption, Achebe's protagonist falls short of carrying any consistent postcolonial message notably foregrounding Africans' agency for self-rule. This paper will deal with the socio-political referents reflected or refracted by each of the writers considered in order to distinguish their ideological differences despite the apparent resemblance noted in terms of characterization and narrative mode. Arthur Joyce Cary and Chinua Achebe have made their mark on modern literature in English through their fictions, notably those which concern Africa. The British Empire looms large in two of their novels, respectively *Mister Johnson* (1939) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960). Both of them focus on the unstable relationship between the codified system established by Britain in Nigeria and the age-long practice of local traditions, thus resulting in clashing interests and ethical divergences.

Remarkably, the parallels in theme, narration and characterization between the two works have received only slight critical attention; yet the common ground between them, amounting to the impact of the imperial model of culture on the African literati, represented here by Johnson and Obi Okonkwo, can hardly be overlooked. It is particularly worth examining when we know that Joyce Cary was a British colonial agent of Anglo-Irish descent appointed

to Nigeria between 1913 and 1920, and who claimed knowledge of country and people in writing his novel, while Achebe has dismissed this work as a piece of colonialist writing and responded to it by publishing his first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

I am concerned to show that Achebe's second novel, *No Longer at Ease*, is closer in perspective to *Mister Johnson* than observed, and runs at cross-purposes thematically to *Things Fall Apart*. Like Cary's main character, Obi Okonkwo encapsulates some of the constraints inherent in public duty along colonial lines, and obligations arising from the traditional practices of old, and group interests. It is worth noting from the outset that both protagonists stand as subaltern agents serving the empire, even if Obi, while abiding by colonial rules, is being trained to become a civil servant in his country, which is shortly to become independent. It is granted that the difference in educational standards and intellect between the two young men is an important factor. Johnson has only received a smattering of instruction at a missionary school, while Obi holds a British B.A., and has a good command of literature, history and politics. But the latter has no less admiration and respect for the power and civilization generated by the Empire than the former, and it is under its umbrella that both characters intend to achieve success.

The empire is narrated here from the different perspectives of the colonizer and the colonized, respectively. To determine these perspectives it would be apposite to refer to the spatio-temporal features of each narrative, and to the Bakhtinian notion of chronotope, if such a term encompasses "a configuration of spatial and temporal indicators in a fictional setting and where (and when) certain activities and stories take place" (Clifford, 1988:236). The *topos* of *Mister Johnson* is a remote part of Northern Nigeria where colonial infrastructures and equipment are fast expanding under the diligent supervision of British colonial officers. The location is Fada, a town which hosts various offices and stores, and where the young Johnson is a clerk under the care of Rudbeck, the Assistant District Officer, and the time mark is the period after the First World War. The relationship between the colonial manager and the African subaltern is reduced to the condescending posture of the official who knows better and, as it were, carries "the white man's burden" of mischievous and error-prone Africans. The attitude of Blore, the District Officer is, in any case, that of total contempt of Negro clerks, and Johnson in particular. The following information is given about Mr Blore:

He likes old things in their old places and he dreads all change, all innovation. To his mind, a messenger in a white gown, even if he speaks and writes English, is a gentleman; but a clerk in trousers, even if he can barely do either, is an upstart, dangerous to the established order of things (p.25).

In contrast, Rudbeck is the milder figure of colonialism. He represents the change in methods with natives that Blore stubbornly rejects. His attitude with Johnson is not without benevolence, refusing to see in him the fickle manipulator that Blore holds him to be. For him he is the simple-minded "wog" that amuses him and his newly-wed wife, Celia, and also acts as a useful intermediary between him and his native road builders.

If we now turn to the chronotopes of *No Longer at Ease*, the location is the Lagos of pre-independence Nigeria, and the historical period situated between 1956 and 1957. Images of modernity are afforded to this city, with areas bearing the marks of Westernisation, and where civil servants like Obi are accommodated, and work in spacious offices. The signs of

transition towards independence are also noticeable in the fact that several members of the local *litterati* appear on the scene, Chris and Joseph who are Obi's friends, Clara the nurse with whom he is in love, Sam Okoli, the smart-looking member of parliament, and Obi himself who secures a high position as secretary for scholarships, but still under the control of the British administration. His superior, Mr Green, is still in office to control the affairs of Nigeria, and holds enough power to admonish obedient agents like Mr Omo for slight reasons. The following instance of the white man's arrogance towards his old assistant helps Achebe to stress the colonizer's hegemonic attitude:

"Why hasn't the Study Leave File been passed to me? Mr Green asked".

"I thought..."

"You are not paid to think, Mr Omo, but to do what you're told. Is that clear? Now send the file to me immediately".

"Yes, sir" (NLAE, p. 59).

The position of subalternity of the indigenous administrative agent is thus clear in this passage. And just like Cary's Mr Blore, Mr Green continues to hold a discourse of paternalism even to Obi:

"It is of course none of my business, really. But in a country where even the educated have not reached the level of thinking about tomorrow, one has a clear duty! He made the word 'educated' taste like vomit (NLAE, p.87)

As said, the standards of education between the two characters are dissimilar, and Johnson is only allowed for very little literacy and intellectual autonomy. His portrait is drawn from the perspective of a European observer, i.e. rendering the image of the childish and irrational African that will incense African cultural revivalists. No judging capacity is granted to him, no possibility of behaving maturely is given him. He is a vastly ignorant, incompetent clerk who cannot spell words correctly, mixes files and confuses rubrics in them, much to the dismay of Rudbeck, who is made to exclaim: "go away, go away Mr Johnson, before I murder you. Take them (files) away before I strangle you"(Mr J,p.61).

In Cary's portrait of the colonized, the 'Caliban' aspect of Johnson cannot be missed by the reader: the boy's mental balance much depends on his belief in the friendship and protection of Rudbeck, who is the link between him and the Empire which he serves enthusiastically, though tentatively. His understanding of its state apparatus is quite dim, and his image of England and its king even less clear. The "clipped accent" and pidgin English with which he sings of England are signifiers of the cultural distance between him and the "mother country":

England is my country

Oh England my home all on de big water.

dat king of England is my king

de bes' man in de worl', his heart is too big,

oh England all on de big water (Mr J, p.41).

Aspects of a shallow form of acculturation characterises him, too. As a typical colonized subject, Johnson is made to think that any form of refinement is necessarily European. For his upcoming marriage, he orders his fiancée Bamu to wear wedding garments that came straight from England, that is “the white wedding dress” and the “white stockings and the white canvas shoes” (p.47) that come with it. The device of caricature is used to signify the distance between the seemingly coherent behaviour of the bride and her family, and the quaint attitude of this imperfect imitator of the white man. The ontological gap between Johnson and the backwoods Bamu is about values that she is not prepared to accept, just like she resists being one of those “civilized wives with loving Christian husbands who never beat them and are their kind friends”(p.46). But insidiously, African ways are here, by implication, made to include wife beating as a “normal” practice.

Now in Achebe’s novel, Obi Okonwo’s attraction to empire is equally brought to our attention, despite a measure of the young man’s faithfulness to the old order, chiefly because of filial attachments. In effect his university education abroad, financed by his hometown association in Lagos, the Umuofia Progressive Union, has allowed him to acquire a good education. He is conversant with Western writers (Graham Greene, Dickens, Auden), whom he can discuss on equal terms with members of the panel conducting his job interview. His education has fashioned his personality and somewhat marked him off from his community. Obi’s profile is that of an évolué who aspires to live like a Westernised young man in the most Euro-oriented spaces of Lagos. About intellectuals of this kind, Eric Hobsbawm writes: “The invented traditions imported from Europe not only provided whites with models of command, but also offered Africans models of modern behavior”(Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983:212).

These notably concern professional ethics, and in that respect Mr Green is certainly for Obi the example to follow. Obi’s admiration for the colonial officer comes from his attitude, which, although paternalistic, reveals total professionalism and dedication at work:

No matter how much he disliked Mr Green, he nevertheless had some admirable qualities. Take for instance his devotion to duty. Rain or shine, he was in the office half an hour before official time, and quite often worked long after two, or returned again in the evening (...) A most intriguing character, Obi thought... (p.96).

Simon Gikandi quite adequately writes: “Obi cannot escape from his colonial heritage because his identity is mapped, as it were, by England (Gikandi, 1993:10), and his imitation of the British ways shows an unconscious desire to exercise power after the colonial model. On the other hand, we do see in him a more inquisitive and mature mind than in Johnson. Discernment is what differentiates him from his predecessor. For instance, we can observe quite clearly through him the non-innocent role of the British Mr Green, whose “panoptic” surveillance and control of Nigerian sectors augurs neo- colonialism. Furthermore, Obi is aware of the presence of the likable Miss Tomlinson, the white secretary as another means of control.

He knew that many of these secretaries were planted to spy on Africans. One of their tactics was to pretend to be very friendly and broadminded. One had to watch what one said. (NLAE, p.77).

As compared to Cary’s character, Obi is politicized, and Achebe endows him with a fair capacity for judging situations, and for identifying, if not deconstructing, imperialist postures

and discourses. However, he is no less permeable than his earlier counterpart to corruption, in reaction to the pressures caused by similar circumstances featuring the demands of official duty clashing with those of the traditional system of group solidarity.

In effect in the two novels considered, the image of the African educated is impaired by a moral weakness, by an important flaw in personality. One aim for Cary in portraying his character is to show his inherent flippancy regarding public issues, ignoring the debts he has incurred to make merry with friends and to prepare for his costly wedding with Bamu, the “bush” girl. In a characteristically comic way, Johnson affects due respect for the principles of integrity and rigour at work that befits his position as government clerk. One instance of this posture is his statement to Waziri, the envoy of the local Hausa emir who requires information leaks from the official mail under his care. He thus spells out his incorruptibility.

“You say to me, Mister Johnson, you government man, you belong for the king (...) I – Johnson- belong for the king. I mister Rudbeck’s frien’. I no take money for king’s letters. I no fit do such ting” (Mr J,p39).

But the ensuing events and his embezzlement of government money do lead to his dismissal from work, and eventually to his (hardly conceivable) robbery and murder of sergeant Gollup in his shop. This then conforms to the colonial image of the corrupt and unreliable native given early by the District Officer, his former boss. A kind of mental deficiency of the man is to be understood from his speech when he confesses the murder to Rudbeck, who acts as judge.

‘I jus’ done it, that’s all. I ‘gree for dem Sargy too much- I never ‘fraid of him, but when he came to catch me I’fraid he take me for prison.’

‘Wait, you must take the oath. Now, you say you liked the sergeant?’

‘Yaas, sah, we very good frien’.

‘ Did you mean to kill him, then?’

‘Oh, no, sah, I ‘gree for him too much. I didn’t want to hurt Sargy One lil bit’(Mr J,p.232).

Joyce Cary in his preface to the book, said he wanted his character to be as true to life as possible, mainly an African with a capacity for “joy” and “laughter” (Mr J,p.9). Most Western analysts of *Mister Johnson* have emphasized his humanity in the first place. Charles Larson considers that “all his emotions are immediate, whether they be love, hate, desire or despair (Larson,1969: vi). Molly Mahood adds that “Johnson’s vitality is not only creative but generous as well. He is, by nature, Friday’s child, loving and giving” (Mahood,1964:174). And according to William Boyd, “Johnson is too diverse, too prodigal an individual to be pinned down by any racial stereotyping (...) Mister Johnson in short, is a great literary creation”(Mr J, p.3). But the plot line reveals the man as a no less irresponsible being; he appears as an *alazon*, to use Northrop Frye’s reference to self-deceiving characters, that can take either comic or tragic roles, or both as can be seen here (Frye, 1957:176 ; 217). Chinua Achebe is precisely interested in the portrait of Johnson, and has drawn attention to the racist stereotypes it contains, and postcolonial critics after him follow the same line, considering it as a “product of British imperialism” (Morrison,2007:81). But if we turn to examine Achebe’s presentation of Obi as a model to contradict the stereotyping of Joyce Cary’s Johnson, then

we can express reservations, because we see how close in character the former is to the latter. By making his hero a product of western education, and vulnerable to mundane temptations, the Nigerian writer impairs his image of the idealist young Nigerian that will help his country rise from the darkness of imperial hegemony and promote ethical attitudes.

Agency and a capacity to turn western knowledge into beneficial instruments for progress are indeed missing qualities in this character. He deploras corruption, and unfittingly uses western cultural references to describe the disgraceful attitudes of people taking bribes in the course of duty:

'What an Augean stable!' He muttered to himself. 'Where does one one begin? With the masses? Educate the masses? He shook his head. 'Not a chance there. It would take centuries. A handful of men at the top. Or even one man with vision- an enlightened dictator' (NLAE,p.40).

But this discourse is to no avail. The image of the hero that fails tragically in his enterprise of social reform cannot stand as a model of ethics. I agree with the critic Arnd Witte, who suggests that Obi's political judgment is Euro-centric, and close to the logic of colonialism (Morrison, 2007:82). He appears as an example of those dedicated intermediaries that will continue to serve the Empire even after independence is gained, having been trained to operate with western paradigms of conduct. On the other hand, despite warnings from imperial quarters, Obi cannot quite distance himself from communal ties; tradition, represented by his Umuofia community, expects him to serve its interests just like it helped him to study abroad. It is precisely his costly western lifestyle and his intention to remain in the western fold that cause his disaster. He cannot fulfill his desire to marry an 'osu' girl, an outcast in Ibo tradition because of pressures coming from the traditional group. And as he must clear his debts, notably those due to the UPU, he resorts to taking bribes, and hence fails to be a model of virtue both in the western tradition and in the public eye. Ultimately, he turns out to be as corrupt an agent of Empire as Johnson is before him. No crime is committed in Obi's case, but betraying ideals of fighting off age- long taboos and allowing his fiancée Clara to have an abortion after calling off their marriage can constitute similar elements of tragedy.

Obi's lack of agency is shown in his inability to accommodate his modern mindset with his African heritage. Like Cary's hero, Obi Okonkwo, the undeserving grandson of the anti-colonialist hero of *Things Fall Apart*, is brought to face a trial and a severe condemnation by the Empire for gross corruption in the exercise of public duty. If the behaviour of this character differs from the antics of the childish Johnson, Achebe has maintained in him the type of servant of Empire who betrayed his ideals of loyalty to his hierarchy. Thus Obi is no positive hero, and the reading of *No Longer at Ease* as a novel that "writes back" to the imperialist mentality of Joyce Cary and his likes can hardly be sustained. At best, Achebe is content to convey here a message of integrity to the Nigerian intelligentsia in charge of steering their country towards unity and genuine progress.

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