

## ACHEBE'S FEMINIST MODERNITY AND THE AFRICAN POSTCOLONIAL DILEMMA: THE CASE OF CLARA IN *NO LONGER AT EASE*

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### Abstract

*This study adopts Postcolonial feminism to explore the personality and cultural identity of Clara as presented by Achebe in No Longer at Ease. The aim is to establish an interplay between post colonialism and feminism in a novel that has already been described by critics as "a pioneering text of postcolonial criticism." In this context, the novel is examined as a powerful representation of the crisis of being post colonial and modern, while seeking legitimacy in the moral economy of tradition and culture. For Simon Gikandi, "if the postcolonial condition implies the location of subjects between historical, cultural and temporal spaces, then No Longer at Ease can be considered to have been the first novel to thematize this dilemma." Apart from Gikandi's assertion, No Longer at Ease has been reputed as a fictional representation of the complications of a society on the verge of postcolonial modernity, with much of the conversations focused on Obi Okonkwo. It is however discovered that not much, in the above regard, has been written on Clara, the major female character in the work. This study therefore sets out to interrogate the extent to which Clara can be presented as the ultimate portrait of a pioneer modern African woman, from the Achebean narrative oeuvre, particularly in the (post)colonial sense. Conclusions are drawn and recommendations are made after the critical assessment of Clara.*

**Keywords:** Postcolonial Feminism, Modernity, Multicultural, Dilemma, Tradition.

### Introduction

Achebe is the veteran Nigerian author whose creative works, like those of his Nigerian and African contemporaries are underlined with patriarchy. Or is it the critics that have continued to analyze their works from a patriarchal point of view undermining the looming presence of some fictional strong women? History shows that from the pre-colonial era, especially in the African cultural setting, women have occupied strategic spiritual and temporal positions and have contributed significantly to growth and national development. This has also been replicated in literary texts including Achebe's novels. But literary critics, the majority of whom are male chauvinists have, unfortunately, presented women as constituting only the core of the workforce who engage in farming, tending domestic animals, nurturing children and are "meant only to be seen but not heard." In portraying the status and plight of African women, Rajesh (2014) writes:

The patriarchal society since time immemorial has imposed some strict restrictions on African women as they are forbidden from society in all the important activities like the nation building and other culturally relevant affairs. They are doomed with the household work like fetching water, nurturing

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children and hiding behind the four walls of their mud houses leaning over the walls thirsting for freedom. (35)

From Rajesh's submission above, two factors are obvious. One is that the societal shackles in which the African woman has been cocooned began from "time immemorial." The timelessness of the feminine ordeal is said to be rooted in the mythical history of creation in which both Christianity and the traditional creation myths agree that women were 'made' for the comfort of men and were responsible for 'Man's Great Fall.' Ikem in Achebe's *AntHills of the Savannah* corroborates this view when he argues that creation myths are not just about the beginning of the earth; rather that they are the beginning of men's oppression on women (Qtd in Rajesh, 2014: 34).

The second point in Rajesh's opinion is the fact that women know that they are shackled and therefore seek liberty from the socio-cultural enslavement.

Apart from the creation myth and African pre-colonial practices, the colonialists also relegated the status of African women in both their colonial administration and their literary representations. The European colonial interests did not represent African women as fully developed individuals of equal humanity with men, rather they were etched in their (European writers) canonical works as the objects of sex. Writing about European patriarchy in Africa, Rajesh explains further;

Colonial rulers and Christian Missionaries introduced the system of European patriarchy in African Society. Their ideas of the appropriate social role for women differed greatly from the traditional role of women in indigenous Nigerian societies. The idea of the colonizers resembled the patriarchal European assumption that women belonged to the home, engaged in child-bearing – an exclusively female responsibility – and other domestic chores. The colonizers expected African societies to consider women as subordinates to men... (35)

In order to enforce the above, the colonial masters passed restrictive legislation against women preventing them from participating in policy making and implementation during their administration. That instigated many Nigerian women to engage in several protests, one of which was the Aba Women's Riot in 1929 ([www.africanliberty.org](http://www.africanliberty.org)).

The subsumed identity of women persisted in creative writers' world where women occupied only a second class status in humanity, where every man does all he can to avoid being effeminate. This is exemplified in *Things Fall Apart* where Okonkwo, the protagonist plunges into self-destruction as a result of a concealed desire to be the 'antithesis' of his 'feminine' father. Feminism therefore symbolizes weakness, failure and everything negative. And women in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* are generally presented as one of the numerous properties and titles a man can acquire. The following will suffice: "There was a wealthy man in Okonkwo's village who had three huge barns, nine wives and thirty children. His name was Nwakibie and he had taken the highest but one title which a man could take in the clan" (*Things Fall Apart*, 18). When Ezinma exhibits positive traits, Okonkwo does not encourage her to harness those potentials rather he just wishes that she is a boy, because it is believed that positive traits are strictly masculine. Women in the world of *Things Fall Apart* (TFA) were

objects to be acquired and controlled. That is why Okonkwo feels happy when his son, Nwoye grumbles about women. For him, this shows that “he would be able to control his women folk” (*TFA*, 49) which is the sign of a real man.

In the play ground too, the social structure only allows women to stand and watch events “from the fringe like outsiders” (*TFA* 83) after the men have sat on their special seats. Such has been the relegation of the status of the African women both in status in reality and as portrayed in the world of African fiction. The grave implication of all these, is the fact that the woman becomes psychologically conditioned and complacent in her docile state.

In our study text, *Obi*, the protagonist is a London-trained grammarian who has to face the vicissitudes of life when he returns from his European academic odyssey. Discourses focused on *Obi* as well as his dilemma in the novel have received a reasonable level of critical attention, but the same cannot be said of Clara. There is obviously a paucity of discourse on Clara, the major female character, who like *Obi* is London-trained, and also faces the dilemma of attending to the demands of living in a society that has become multicultural as a result of huge historical circumstances. She also has to navigate her own fate within such African cultural universe despite being haunted by the *Osu* traditional practice. This study attempts to fill this critical lacuna as it investigates the hybrid personality of Clara with a view to finding out the kind of cultural identity which Achebe seeks to construct for Clara.

The study seeks to find out if Achebe in creating the character of Clara is suggesting that African postcolonial modernity provides a platform where the patriarchal Africa of *Things Fall Apart* is being mellowed on the altar of modernity.

### **Theoretical Framework**

This study adopts Postcolonial Feminism as its theoretical base. In the first place, Postcolonialism as a literary theory encompasses the totality of the creative works produced from postcolonies. Postcolonial discourses represent the tension between two worlds: the imperial center that the colonial world was and the periphery that is struggling to decenter that former center. They involve discussions about experience of various kinds: migration, slavery, suppression, resistance, representation, difference, race, gender, place and responses to the influential master discourses of imperial Europe ... and the fundamental experiences of speaking and writing by which all these came into being (2). The postcolonial theory is very relevant because it enables scholars “to read the past and present while also placing different locations, the here (usually the first world) and there (usually the third world) on the same cognitive map.” (Bahri Deepika, 195).

Discourses on Postcolonialism have always considered the issues of gender, sexuality and the woman question, as well as those of race, nation and empire. The early prominence of genders in the colonial project and postcolonial studies became imperative because of the argument that Mainstream or Western Feminism could not comprehensively represent the peculiar experiences of women from postcolonial countries. Feminists in once colonized territories felt that their western counterparts were explicitly euro-centric in the approach. For them, the universalization of women and their experiences undermines their own peculiar circumstances, hence the emergence and consolidation of Postcolonial Feminism. Prominent postcolonial feminists whose works have formed the basis for such gender studies include Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohantray, among others.

They argued that the socio-cultural circumstances of women from postcolonies can only be well articulated and properly addressed by feminists of such postcolonial nations. Therefore postcolonial feminism analyzes “the nervous conditions of being a woman in a postcolonial [patriarchal] environment, whether in the social oppression of the postcolony or the metropolis” (Young, 115). It is also important to point out that the “feminist ideology lays the task of self-actualization on women [themselves]” (<http://www.nigeriavillagesquare.com>)

The emphasis on “the nervous conditions of being a woman” in a postcolony forms the basis of this study as it relates to Clara in Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*. Clara is studied here as a postcolonial subject with a hybrid personality but who is intricately woven in the complexities of the culture-specific inhibition known as the *Osu* caste system.

### Textual Analysis

The portraiture of women in Achebe’s fictional universe unveils the existing socio-cultural situations that mark the period he depicts. In *No Longer at Ease*, there is an identifiable change in the way Achebe has presented his female characters in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and even *Arrow of God* (1964). While there seems to be the absence of a moderating female principle in both novels, Clara in *No Longer at Ease* can be said to be a symbol/agent of change who radically departs from the script written by patriarchy and handed down to the traditional African woman. She seems to be in confrontation with the myth of female docility, in favour of self-actualization. Below are some attributes that mark Clara out as a modern female character who is cut up in the African post colonial dilemma:

### Clara as a postcolonial subject

*No Longer at Ease* is a subtle critique of the effect of colonialism in creating floating characters, characters that can perfectly be described as hybrid. In the pre-colonial African setting the girl child was tied to her mother’s or mother-in-law’s apron string. The elderly women greatly influenced the younger ones in order to effectively groom them for the all-important and demanding task of mothering and wifely duties. Through this medium, the girl child is continuously indoctrinated and goes on to propagate the beliefs, custom and tradition which mostly served the interest of men. This is perfectly exemplified by Rapu in Chika Unigwe’s *Night Dancer* (2013). Rapu’s relationship with her mother enables her to imbibe the traditionally-held belief about marriage, men and the manner of man-woman/husband-wife relations. However, with colonialism and the accompanying western education in Nigeria, there has been a shift from the mostly informal education to a very formal one. This has affected certain African configurations, although initially the western education of the girl child was considered with sentiments, as portrayed in Buchi Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen* (1974). In Emecheta’s novel, Ada, the protagonist, is a victim of the repressive cultural practice which subjects the girl child to a sub-human social status. She is denied formal education while her younger brother is enrolled into school. When she insists on going to school, she is only allowed to acquire basic education because of a possible economic advantage. It is expected that acquiring basic education will attract more money for her bride price. However, the condition has greatly improved in contemporary times.

Obviously, the acquisition of enlightenment through western education engenders a differing perspective and disposition towards certain cultural practices. Women who are

educated especially up to the tertiary level possess a relatively high cognitive ability. This can be said of Clara, a young Nigerian woman who is trained in the United Kingdom as a nurse. Her exposure to the West as well as her acquisition of the Western education mark her out as different from an average Nigerian woman of her time. Clara can be said to be a post colonial subject considering her hybrid personality, her level of exposure and western education as well as her response to the socio-cultural stigma of the *Osu* caste system which attempts to militate against her.

### Clara as a Modern African Woman

Clara represents a new mode of female characterization in Achebean fictional oeuvre. In fact, she is the first of her kind in Nigerian literature. It is believed that in the Achebean fictional universe, women "should be seen and not heard." This cannot be said about Clara. She is educated abroad, has a career as a nurse and believes that her individuality should be acknowledged, and respected. She is different from the women in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* published two years before *No Longer at Ease* (NLAE) and his *Arrow of God* published in 1964 four years after NLAE. In those other two, patriarchy was palpable intruding oppressively into every sphere of existence. In the androcentric world of the two novels, the man was everything and the woman, nothing. Domestically, women were quantified as part of men's acquisitions. They "were to be seen not heard, coming and going with mounds of foo foo, pots of water, market baskets, fetching kola, being scolded and beaten before they disappear behind the huts of their compound" (TFA 34).

Such women only challenge "... their husbands in the safety of their kitchen, saying how much they disagreed with a certain viewpoint... yet they would go ahead with their men's wishes: visit that in-law they did not like at all... accept that son their husband had with another woman" (*Night Dancer*, 142-143). They were just happy and satisfied serving their mostly promiscuous and oppressive husbands. But Clara is an epitome of the modern African woman, emancipated and enlightened through the western education she acquires. She lives a modern lifestyle. This is obvious in her relationship with Obi. She loves movies while Obi loves poetry. She does not submerge herself and her desires into Obi's own likes and dislikes like the traditional African woman should. For Clara, if she tolerates Obi, he also has a duty to tolerate her too. And when she feels that her opinion is not respected, she reacts as in the following scene:

What is making you so moody? He [Obi] looked sideways at Clara who was ostentatiously sitting as far away from him as she could, pressed against the left door. She did not answer. "Tell me, darling," he said, holding her hand in one of his hands while he drove with the other. "Leave me, ojare," she said, snatching her hand away.

Obi knew very well why she was moody. (17)

The ability to resist her man and express anger while the man has to plead is not seen in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. In other words, Clara's character does not just fall into the category of a pioneer feminist feature within the Achebean literary landscape and even within the emerging universe of modern African literature but she represents Achebe's deliberate construction and representation of the increasing empowerment and discovery of the

marginalized portraits and voices of the African woman in the African universe of the mid twentieth century.

### **Clara and Self Assertion**

Clara is also presented as stubborn and self assertive. Although Clara is trained as a nurse – one of the “professions which encouraged the virtues of nurturing and caring, the perfect professions for a wife” (*Night Dancer*, 172); but her individuality obviously contradicts the one which tradition seems to approve for women in her society. She does not submit to the dictates of tradition, rather she is seen, she is heard, and she dominates and asserts herself like Ezi in Chika Unigwe’s *Night Dancer*. She is not bothered about how others judge her actions. This plays out in the scene when she bombs into Obi’s residence as he entertains his female guest:

Another car drew up outside with a screech of brakes, and Clara rushed in, as was her fashion, humming a popular song. She stopped abruptly on seeing the girl.

“Hello, Clara. This is Miss Mark.”

“How do you do? She said stiffly, with a slight nod of the head. She did not offer her hand. ‘How did you like the soup?’ she asked Obi. ‘I am afraid I prepared it in a hurry.’ In those two short sentences she sought to establish one or two facts for the benefit of the strange girl.

First, by her sophisticated un-Nigerian accent she showed that she was a been-to. You could tell a been-to not only by her phonetics, but by her walk – quick, short steps instead of the normal leisurely gait... Secondly, her proprietary air seemed to tell the girl: “You had better try elsewhere” (84-85).

By this domineering demeanor, she asserts herself and personality in an intimidating manner. She has a way of making Obi abide by her biddings. Clara’s and Obi’s relationship can be described as chequered because of her assertive and stubborn nature. In fact, “whenever Obi had a difficult discussion with Clara, he planned all the dialogue beforehand. But when the time came it always took a completely different course” (98). This happens because Obi cannot predict Clara’s reactions. He always ends up sounding defensive before Clara.

One can therefore deduce an intertextual relationship between Clara and such characters as Ada in Buchi Emecheta’s *Second Class Citizen* (1974) based on diasporic empowerment where the London metropole is configured as a site of equal opportunities.

### **Clara: Strong-willed and Pragmatic:**

Clara is portrayed as being very strong-willed and pragmatic. Despite her being a victim of the Igbo *Osu* caste system, Clara is still undeterred. She “had no coyness in her” (64). She pursues her dreams and aspirations doggedly against a debilitating cultural jinx – and is always a step ahead of Obi. Right from their first meeting in a dance in London, Clara is always a step ahead of Obi:

They met at a dance organized by the London branch of the [NCNC]... Clara had come with a student who was fairly known to Obi and who introduced them. Obi was immediately struck by her beauty... In the end he succeeded in getting a dance with her. But he was so flustered that the only thing he could find to say was "Have you been dancing very long?" "No. why?" was the curt reply. Obi was never a very good dancer... (20).

Clara is obviously unimpressed with Obi's dancing skills and limps after he crushes her feet. Eight months after, the duo meet again in their voyage home. At sea, Clara observes that Obi is not feeling very well, so she goes to his cabin. She explains immediately Obi opens his door, "I noticed you were not looking very well," she said to Ibo, "So I brought you some tablets of Avomine." She gave him an envelop with half a dozen white tablets in it. "Take two before you go to bed." "Thank you very much. It is so kind of you." Obi was completely overwhelmed and all the coldness and indifference he had rehearsed deserted him. "But," he stammered, "am I not depriving you of er..." (22).

When Obi eventually declares his love for Clara, she is hesitant and when prompted to talk, she boldly tells Obi:

"I can't marry you..."

"I am an Osu..."

"So you see we cannot get married," she said, quite firmly almost gaily – a terrible kind of gaiety (63-64)

As accurately described, Clara 'had no coyness in her' (64). She seems always so sure of herself even when referring to such a debilitating dehumanizing cultural stigma. She understands the socio-cultural implication of the Osu status more than Obi who seems and sounds so naïve about it. He goes on to give Clara an engagement ring, although by instinct, Clara knows that their relationship is a cul-de-sac. She poignantly tells him that: "She was very sorry to let him down at this eleventh hour. But she was sure it would be in everybody's best interest if they broke off their engagement..." (112), as his family will definitely be against such plan. And of course, she will not want to come between him and his family (113).

When Obi's mother eventually narrates her dream to him and solemnly advises him to wait a little for her to die before he marries Clara, he still pleads with Clara for them to hang on a little more and wait as he works on his mother. Clara knows better than what Obi has told her as she asks him,

"Have you finished..."

"Your story" (129).

Immediately, she calls off their engagement by simply pulling off her ring and holding it out to him. She tells Obi conclusively, "You are making things difficult for yourself. How many times did I tell you that we were deceiving ourselves?" Through this way, she practically ends the relationship. Her dogged assertive nature is the attribute she needs to pull through the complications of an unwanted pregnancy. She refuses to organize a pity party for herself. Even when the doctor they consult for abortion suggests marriage to Obi, she cuts in emphatically,

"I don't want to marry him..."

"I say I won't marry him. Isn't that enough?" (132).

Obi tries severally to plead with her, and when she does not give him any attention, he writes an apology letter to her, which she sends back unopened. To completely sever the relationship and every link to Obi she leaves Lagos after being discharged from the hospital.

From the above presentation of Clara, it can be concluded that Clara is a modernist female character, emancipated through her exposure to western education, assertive, pragmatic, though culturally constrained by the *Osu* caste system.

### Conclusion

This study appraised the person and character of Clara Okeke as a modern woman who tries to find a bearing in the chasm between a dying colonialism and stillborn independence. Clara who is educated, classy, sophisticated and assertive despite being stigmatized by the *Osu* belief system hung on her neck, seems to exist outside the socio-cultural context of the Nigerian women of her generation. Postcolonial feminism was adopted as a theoretical base for the study because Clara is a postcolonial modern woman and the *Osu* jinx is culturally-specific. This forms a feminist reading of Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* where the humanity of both Clara and Obi Okonkwo, her fiancé is juxtaposed and examined. The paper therefore concludes that Clara, the major female character who like Obi is London-trained, also faces the predicament of attending to the demands of living in a society that has become multicultural as a result of huge historical circumstances. This work addresses one of the socio-cultural factors that militate against the womenfolk. It is imperative to mention that sixty years after the publication of *No Longer at Ease*, African women are still contending with certain socio-cultural practices that cocoon them in a patriarchal society.

### Recommendations

Having successfully conducted and concluded this study, the following are therefore recommended:

Women are the major architects of their predicament and it takes personal effort to emancipate and liberate a woman from societal limitations. Therefore, women are advised to pursue their dreams and aspirations and assume their rightful position in the scheme of human affairs.

It is also recommended that Africans should re-examine some of the still obnoxious traditional practices, just as they have done with some others as killing of twins, etc. this will enable them to expunge those ones that already obsolete especially in the twenty-first century.

Government, non-governmental organizations and other relevant agencies should regularly organize enlightenment programs for women's socio-cultural emancipation at the federal, state and local government levels.

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