Chinua Achebe's Engagement with City Life in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*

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Abstract

In spite of the encomiums often poured on Chinua Achebe for inventing the modern African novel, his orientation of resuscitating a sense of pride in Africa's own cultural achievement tends to overshadow his interest in city life. This paper offers a study of Achebe's engagement with city life through No Longer at Ease and A Man of the People and foregrounds his demonstrable concern about the problems plaguing the modern African city. The paper uses the Postcolonial approach which focuses on the destructive effects of colonialism on traditional values to critically examine Achebe's literary rendering of city experience. It pays particular attention to what seems to be Achebe's conclusion that what happens in the city are a brain child of colonisation and that urban pollution is a result of the invasion and destruction of African values by colonial experience. The parochial attitude of ethnic groups in the city often rob city dwellers of confidence of citizenship; hence, they tend to regard the city as an entity that creates or exacerbates their misery and generally stand in their way of achieving true happiness. This unhelpful attitude has negative implication for the reading public since people act from perception rather than reality.

Introduction

> We are strangers in this land. If good comes to it may we have our share. [...]. But if bad comes let it go to the owners of the land who know what gods should be appeased. [...] (*No Longer At Ease*, 5-6).

Most commentaries on Achebe's fictional works tend to place greater emphasis on the village traditional setting of *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, almost to the neglect of his pre-occupation with the

urban environment. The relegation of Achebe's interest in urban environment has prompted Onuora Ossie Enekwe (1988) to assert that "Achebe's significance lies essentially in his historical consciousness and his insight into human nature" (60). Similarly, Ernest Emenyonu (1978) observes that Achebe's "first four novels are a series in which the reader looks at the issues arising out of African cultural and political development from a chronological and historical perspective" (45). Eustace Palmer (1972) also contends that "*A Man of the People* belongs to the same tradition as *Things Fall Apart* (72)."

It is instructive, however, that three out of Achebe's five novels are quintessential city novels addressing the full range of contemporary issues; personal, political, local or national. Indeed, Achebe's urban novels are rich and profound in depicting the city's constant moulding and re-moulding of the lives of its residents, particularly its unwholesome influence on the individual. Hence, present in these novels are the common concerns such as inadequate infrastructure, crime and the menace of street urchins which often agitate the minds of other African writers like Ngugi wa Thiong'o in *Petals of Blood* and Ayi Kwei Armah in *Two Thousand Seasons*, who have made comparative submissions on the city and the countryside.

The need to study and comprehend the city in literature compels an examination of Achebe's perception of the city in view of his position and stature in literature having influenced a whole generation of African writers who have emulated his ingenuity and vision. Achebe's works are also complex and sophisticated because he is highly skilled. It is important, therefore, to interrogate how he handles the conflict between the old and new values of individualistic tendencies in the city; and how this conflict makes or mars his city dweller subjects. Most importantly, a critical examination of his interaction with the city is mandatory because he shows how the attitude of people in the city makes it fail.

Post-Colonial Criticism and the City

Mary Klages (2006) studied Post-Colonial theory and holds that it is "concerned with examining the mechanisms through which colonising powers persuaded the colonised people to accept a foreign culture as 'better' than their own indigenous methods of government and social

organisation"(153). Similarly, Hans Bertens (2008) observes that "Post-colonial theory and criticism emphasises the tension between the metropolis and the former colonies, between [...] the metropolitan, imperial centre and its colonial satellites (159). Klages explains further that

> British colonial rule meant teaching the indigenous people about the superiority of Western practices through setting up systems of police and courts and legislatures following British laws, through sending missionaries to convert natives to Christianity [...[and establishing churches and seminaries, and through setting up schools [...]. And with this ideological exportations came Western 'culture', in the form of music, art, and literature [...] regardless of the ancient [...] traditions of [...] the [...] inhabitants of these colonised areas [...] (Literary Theory: A Guide for the Perplexed, 148-9).

According to Klages, Postcolonial theory is pre-occupied with the emotional, political and economic effects of colonisation, and in how texts, including literary texts, respond to the coloniser-colonised experience. She added that Post-Colonial studies is interested in the attitude of resistance on the part of the colonised, thereby revealing how and why in many works of literature, especially those coming from Africa, characters often struggle with their identities. History records, for instance, that the British had a colonial presence in Nigeria from 1900 until 1960 when Nigeria gained its independence; hence, the people of Nigeria and its literary production have had to deal with the effects of British legacy ever since then.

Consequently, the need for cultural re-definition, self-determination and cultural independence easily becomes a leading force behind the Nigerian literature of all genres from the 1950s to the 1970s. It is against this historical experience, therefore, that writers like JP Clark, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, Christopher Okigbo and Chinua Achebe were initially much more interested in dredging the traditional order. It is arguable also, that Achebe's response and reflection on his cultural environment consciously or unconsciously yielded to his

mental aloofness from the city which in all its glamour merely reminds him of the corruptive influences of colonisation.

Also crucial to Postcolonial studies is a critique of Eurocentric thought and attitude intrusions into primordial values which the city encourages through its multiplicity of orientations. Bertens affirms that "Postcolonial theory and criticism radically questions the aggressively expansionist imperialism of the colonising powers" (160) and frowns particularly at the cultural displacement that are prevalent in the city and city life. The overriding submission of Postcolonial criticism on the city, therefore, would seem to be a rejection of the erosion of personal and communal identities which the city engenders. It may also not be unreasonable to submit that Postcolonial theory views cultural displacement and the ambivalences and hybrid cultural forms which dominate the city as a curse rather than a blessing. Similarly, Postcolonial theorists may insist on a critical reassessment of the relationship between the city and its colonial residents and the radical deconstruction of the imperialist perspective which may glorify the city as a symbol of civilisation.

African Writers' Post-colonial Response to the City

To many African writers, the city is the legacy of the degraded form of living to which colonialism has callously subjected the African. Ngugi offers an insightful comparison of the city and the countryside in his presentation of the contrast between the Old and the New Ilmorog in *Petals of Blood***.** For Ngugi, the contrast between the village and the city embodies the destruction of social morality because in the city, human values are trampled upon while rampant materialism, commercialisation of alcohol, high priority for tourists' attraction, proliferation of shanty towns, and glorification of prostitution hold sway. Also in *Devil on the Cross*, Ngugi shows his aversion to the city and city life by portraying a villager, Waringa, who is ruthlessly exploited by the corrupt city dwellers, thereby reinforcing the notorious image of the city as a putrefaction unit.

Another African writer who treats the village as the pre-colonial African past is Ghana's Ayi Kwei Armah who opines that Africa was a Garden of Eden in terms of her social organisation prior to her contact with colonialism (42). He insists that African people lived in

harmonious communities sharing the fruits of their labour and that they did not compete unnecessarily with their neighbours for the acquisition of superior status or material goods. His nostalgic view of the African past is encapsulated in *Two Thousand Seasons*(1973) where he presents the pre-colonial African communities as being completely democratic and devoted to the principle of reciprocity – a principle he describes as "Our way, the way" in the novel*:*

> Our way is reciprocity. The way is wholeness. Our way is hospitable to the guests. The way repels destroyers. Our way produces before it consumes. The way produces far more than it consumes. Our way creates. The way destroys only destruction (*Two Thousand Seasons*, 62).

It seems, therefore, that many African writers prefer to set their work in the village rather than in the city. For example, works such as Kenjo wan Jumbam's *The White Man of God*, Camara Laye's *The African Child,* Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine*, Mongo Beti's *Ville Cruelle*, and *The Old Man and the Medal* by Ferdinand Oyono are all set in the countryside. These writers clearly decry extreme individualistic tendencies of the city.

The tendency of many African writers to view the city as being synonymous with colonialism and to judge it with the same harshness that the negative consequences of colonialism evoke in the minds of people, is also true of Nigerian writers in particular. Many Nigerian writers depict the city in terms of its artificial quality as exemplified in the way Ol' man Forest in Cyprian Ekwensi's *Beautiful Feathers* laments about noisy towns, and concludes that God made the village; but man made the town. Thus, the invasion of the simplicity that characterised the pre-colonial African life, the destruction of the communal way of sharing happiness and sorrow which colonialism engendered are believed to be intricately linked with the creation of Nigerian cities. Hence, Achebe implies in his city novels that the western incursion should be blamed for creating African cities and the impression the reader gets by reading these novels is that Nigeria would not have had cities if not for colonialism.

However, documentary evidence reveals that there were cities in Nigeria before colonialism. Layi Egunjobi (1999) asserts that "It is an established historical fact that urbanisation in Nigeria predates the British colonial administration" (3). Similarly, in his 1964 article "The Evolution and Analysis of the Retail Structure of Lagos, Nigeria's Akin Mabogunje recalls that "in West Africa, […] the roots of cities were already present in the form of indigenous towns, some of which had populations of over 50,000 by the time of the advent of the first European"(3). He however agrees that the growth of African cities is due largely to the political domination of the continent by Europeans. According to Mabogunje, the city of Lagos, though relatively small at the time but with a favourable location "with respect to the new commerce oriented toward Europe and outside world," owed its rapid growth to European domination (5).

These historical facts perhaps partly explain why Achebe's aversion to the political and cultural domination of Nigeria by Europe finds adequate expression in his city books where he demonstrates an almost unfriendly attitude towards the city. For Achebe, the city of Lagos symbolises the legacy of Europe's inglorious domination of Nigeria.

The City in *No Longer at Ease* and *A Man of the People*

One noticeable trend in Achebe's city novels is what appears to be a pre-determined negative perception of city life by his characters even before they take up residence in the city. Often times, the characters' minds seem prepared towards certain negative attributes of the city and in majority of instances, new arrivals come prepared to act in accordance with the pre-determined judgment thereby moulding and shaping the city ethic along increasingly negative path.

In *No Longer at Ease,* Obi's mind is prepared, if not 'poisoned,' about the negative things he is to expect from Lagos long before he takes up permanent residence in the city. The novel recounts that before Obi departed to London for further studies, he spends a few days in Lagos during which his country folk, Joseph, sees the need to let Obi know all the 'important' characteristics and attributes of Lagos. Joseph considers this 'gist' to be so 'important' that both men stay awake till past three o'clock in the morning from the previous evening.

"Dancing is very important nowadays" (12), Joseph tells Obi with interest. He also tells him other 'important' things about Lagos including the cinema and dance halls as well as the fact that he succeeds in retaining the attention of a girl for a full five months emphasising that this is an extraordinary feat in Lagos. Perhaps, the high point of Joseph's narration, one that boosts his self esteem, is the revelation that his girlfriend (whom he admits has already broken up with him), was a virgin at the time of their first meeting, reiterating that virginity "is very rare here" (13). On his part, Obi is fascinated by the stories of Joseph's escapades; but these stories also go a long way to serve as the basis for Obi's first and enduring impression about Lagos as a "strange and sinful world"(13). It is instructive that this early negative impression does not yield to a positive one when Obi returns from England and becomes a Lagos resident; especially as he meets and makes friends with Christopher, an incurable womaniser. Even Joseph's life constitutes a serious indictment on the city. Apart from his clerical appointment with the government, Joseph is a loafer without direction. He appears trapped and imprisoned by the thrills and frills of the city so much that he is incapable of making any major decision about his personal life.

Similarly, when a former school teacher and now member of parliament in Lagos, Chief Nanga, invites the protagonist in *A Man of the People,* Odili Samalu, to "come to the capital and take up a strategic post in the civil service" (13), Odili's secret plan in agreeing to visit the city is to pursue enjoyment; needless to say that for him, the city is a place of pleasure and lust. Also, a member of the minister's entourage seems to affirm Odili's notion of the city when she jokingly cautions him, "I kin see say you na good boy. Make you no agree am spoil you" (20). It turns out that not only Odili's exposure to women in the city succeeds in 'spoiling' him, his discovery of other opportunities, which are hitherto unknown to him, combine to effect a radical negative change in him.

Perhaps to convince the reader that sexual immorality is one of the defining characteristics of Lagos; Nanga, a married man, has no problems sleeping with Agnes, a married woman and lawyer at twenty-five pounds a time. Events in the novel show that Nanga has a string of women he takes to bed at will including an American

woman, Jean, who is not only married but whose infidelity is not limited to Nanga. She sleeps with any man she finds available including a total stranger and 'low class' Odili. Eventually, sexual immorality and lack of self-control drives Nanga to Elsie, his ex-student's girlfriend on the flimsy excuse that Odili earlier told him of how Elsie was only "a good-time girl." The founder of Odili's political party, Max, summarises the frivolous preoccupations of people living in the city when he tells his friend that "women, cars, landed property, that's all they care for (87).

The tendency for city dwellers to lose their cultural values as a result of their contact with the city seems to worry Achebe; and his characters express dissatisfaction with the way the city impacts negative values on its residents. In *No Longer at Ease*, following the discovery that the hero's intended wife, Clara, is an Osu, Obi's kinsmen in Umuofia Progressive Union are astonished that their kinsman could contemplate the idea of marrying her knowing her ancestry. Hence, they promptly put the blame on the city because, in their view, only the city can influence a man to the point of making him forget his history in a hurry or become insensitive to it. The president of the union intones:

> I have lived in this Lagos for fifteen years […]. Lagos is a bad place for a young man […]. I have heard that you are moving around with a girl of doubtful ancestry and even thinking of marrying her […] (75).

Obi's kinsmen are unwilling to consider the possibility that Obi and Clara may have met and fallen in love thousands of kilometres away from Lagos let alone accept that Lagos has played absolutely no role in their meeting and the love relationship between them. Also, Obi is unable to attend his mother's funeral having by then found himself in serious financial problems. He reasons that it is far more useful to send the little money on him to his father to enable him to conduct the funeral rites rather than spend it on transportation. This is, perhaps, the reasoning of the elite. However, it constitutes an almost unpardonable offence within the context of the traditional African milieu for it demonstrates Obi's lack of respect for the memory of his late mother.

This misdemeanour reduces him to the level of a 'beast' in the judgment of his people; and again, the city takes the blame:

> That is what Lagos can do to a young man. He runs after sweet things, dances breast to breast with women and forgets his home and his people (145).

Again, the true position runs contrary to the arbitrary conclusion and judgment of the Umuofia people as events in the novel reveal that the city exerts very little influence on the personality and attitude of the protagonist. To his credit, he neither runs after the 'sweet things' of the city nor gets unduly distracted from his set ambition. Indeed, his relationship with Clara, while it lasts, keeps him away from other women of the city. He is also not into other frivolities in the city.

It is worthy of note that although Achebe recognises and always exposes the inherent weakness and failures of the individual as well as other extraneous factors militating against the well-being of his protagonists, he however seems to distrust and disapprove of the new urban culture which he appears to believe owes its origin to colonialism. In *No Longer At Ease*, for example, Achebe acknowledges and provides further insight into the nature and magnitude of factors other than the city's negative influence as causes of the protagonist's problems:

> The chief result of the crisis in Obi's life was that it made him examine critically for the first time the mainspring of his actions. And in doing so he uncovered…that…this matter of twenty pounds every month to his town union…in the final analysis was the root cause of all his troubles (141).

He shows in the above passage how Obi suffers intense pressure from the insensitivity and collective failure of his town people living in the city. As a senior civil servant, he earns forty-seven pounds a month out of which he is under obligation to pay a whopping twenty pounds to his town union as instalment repayment of the 'scholarship' he got from them to study abroad. He is also to send ten pounds to his parents leaving him with only seventeen pounds which he finds grossly inadequate to run his personal affairs in the city. Achebe also

reveals how members of Obi Okonkwo's town union want to use the opportunity of his closeness to them to advance their own selfish motives which leads to imminent conflict. Achebe even demonstrates profound integrity as an objective author by showing the significant role of the city in the freedom it offers Obi to break away from unwarranted interferences. The largeness of the city, its anonymity and the liberty it gives its inhabitants provide Obi with the courage to plan and execute his decision to lead a decidedly individualistic life.

Notwithstanding this commendable display of forthrightness on Achebe's part, however, it is clear from events in the novel that he is keenly interested in raising questions as to the wisdom or otherwise of standing aloof in the city, without recourse to ethnic attachment in view of the calamity that befalls his protagonist. In other words, could Obi Okonkwo have prevented himself from being jailed if he had continued to allow his kinsmen in the city to mentor and protect him? After all, as much as he wishes he could stand up to his father in the village to denounce his religion, he never summons enough courage to do so throughout the novel; undoubtedly because of his realisation that the village air does not condone insolence and open disrespect for the elders. Indeed, Achebe leaves no one in doubt about his disposition to the city which can be described as guarded as evident in the way he handles the conflict between the old and new values in the urban setting. For example, Obi's sojourn in the city reconditions his thinking to the effect that he no longer needs to be tied to the proverbial apron strings of his parents just as he does not require the interference of his town union in the way he runs his affairs, especially those he considers very private. It is instructive, however, that his father regards the city as "a strange land" (119) and prefers that his son moves close to his kinsmen.

As if in agreement with Obi's father, Achebe highlights the positive role of the Umuofia Progressive Union in trying to assist Obi find his feet in the city. It is to their credit, for instance, that they shower him with genuine love and support. Throughout the novel, they demonstrate an uncommon admiration and sympathy for Obi where necessary and are always willing to assist whenever the need arises. It is not an exaggeration to state that Obi owes his educational achievement to members of the union who tax themselves to see him

through school even if the funds are made available to him merely as a 'loan.' He may not have had the benefit of a higher education, and in England, were it not for the foresight and determination of his people. On his return, they organise a befitting welcome ceremony for him thereby making him feel proud and truly accomplished. They never fail to regularly enquire after his general well-being even if it seems to border on invasion of Obi's privacy sometimes. Their common desire appears to be aimed at guiding Obi in the city. They also always take the pain to explain their every utterance and action in detail. It is arguable, therefore, that Achebe seems to think that Obi's rejection of his father's counsel in this regard may have contributed to the mistakes he makes in the city.

Similarly, in *A Man of the People*, it can be argued that Achebe dutifully assigns a father figure and benevolent protector for his protagonist in the form of the protagonist's former teacher, Chief M.A. Nanga, whose role appears to be to ensure that Odili is not without a guide, a protector and an overseer in the city. The significance of Achebe's insistence on assigning a mentor to his protagonists in the city is noteworthy in view of Toni Morrison's argument regarding the subject. Toni Morrison (1981) argues that the reason black American writers often prefer the countryside to the city is because the benevolent, advising black ancestor is believed to exist in the village but not in the city (38). Ironically, however, through the presence of the Umuofia Progressive Union and Chief M.A. Nanga who serve as mentors to the protagonists in the respective novels, Achebe demonstrates that while it is possible and perhaps desirable to have an advising black ancestor in the city, the advisor in the city may advise and guide in a way that will serve their own parochial interest rather than the interest of the subject and thereby fail to serve a useful purpose in the end. The Umuofia Progressive Union appears to want Obi to be under their control so that he will find jobs for the jobless members of the union having failed in their bid to make him study law so as to take charge of their land matters. Even their desire to have him dress in an impressive manner seems to be aimed at taking the glory for having Obi as their own creation so that they can boast of their achievement to their neighbours. Also, Chief Nanga invites Odili to the city where he plans to assist him perhaps primarily because it gives the older man immense satisfaction and a sense of great

achievement to mentor his ex-student but only as long as Odili will moderate his ambition and will not tread where Nanga reigns.

In spite of the glamour in the city, Achebe seems to hold that the city ought not to affect its inhabitants to such an extent that they will forget their ethnicity or begin to act in ways that run contrary to established village customs. To do that merely on the excuse of living in the city, in Achebe's view, is to invite calamity on the city dweller just as the severance of relations between Obi and his town union ultimately leads to his destruction in *No Longer at Ease*. Apparently acting in concert with what appears to be Achebe's belief, Obi insists that he finds it impossible to fall in love until he meets an Igbo woman. In his revelation of his escapades with women while in England, he concludes that all the relationships he was involved in lacked depth including the one he had with a Nigerian. This suggests that ethnicity plays a key role in determining the strength of his relationship with women. According to him, before he meets Clara,

> He had been quite intimate with […] a Nigerian, a West Indian, English girls, and so on. But these intimacies […] were neither deep nor sincere. There was always a part of him […] which seemed to stand outside it all […] (63).

Also while in England, he reveals that "nothing gave him greater pleasure than to find another Ibo-speaking student in a London bus" (45). Back home in Nigeria and in Lagos, Obi limits his interaction to the Igbo only. The most curious of what seems to be Achebe's submission that the city should not make its inhabitants lose their sense of ethnicity is shown in how almost everybody Obi encounters in the city are of the Igbo extraction. The first man who attempts to bribe him is Igbo and so is the policeman who tries to molest him and Clara. Even more interesting is the account of the incident which he narrates to Christopher to the effect that the policeman immediately drops his combative posture when he realises that Obi and his girlfriend are Igbo. Also of significance is his response to an enquiry about African names while he is in London. According to him, a white man asks him if it is true that "all African names mean something" and he replies, "[…] I don't know about African names – Ibo names,

yes" (23). Obi's friends in the novel, Christopher and Joseph, are Igbo. Members of the Umuofia Progressive Union are not seen elsewhere interacting with non-Igbo city dwellers throughout the novel. Even after their meetings, and regardless of the fact that these meetings take place in the city, they continue to hold tenaciously to their ethnic loyalty insisting that they are "strangers" in the city and that they wish to partake only in the good things of the city (5-6). In spite of Obi's education and exposure and notwithstanding the fact that he lives in the city, he remains strongly committed to and greatly influenced by the dictates of his tribe.

As if in furtherance of this primordial objective, Achebe restricts his characters to their motives for coming to the city and does not permit them the confidence of city citizenship. They tend to view the city purely from a functional perspective. The Umuofia Progressive Union in *No Longer at Ease* declares "that it was money [...] that brought them to Lagos" (72). In other words, the characters are hardly allowed to operate beyond the confines of 'official matters' that occasion their sojourn in the city. They usually interact only with people they have known prior to their coming to the city and those they 'must' interact with. There is usually no spontaneous development of relationships between them on one hand and other 'strangers' in the city and his characters have no real connection with the city. The effect is that the protagonists are often superficial, peripheral and vague in their interactions both with people and the environment of the city. More often than not, the subjects do not hold a holistic view of the city. Obi's entire interaction in *No Longer At Ease* does not go beyond the activities in his office, with members of his town union who are seen only at their meetings and with his girlfriend and two ethnic friends. He does not relate with his neighbours, does not even know them. Similarlyly, Odili in *A Man of the People* is strictly confined to political activities which are to serve as his own means of having access to the 'national cake.'

However, it is possible to argue that Obi's attitude is part of the negative effect of city life and that his behaviour is an attestation to how city life promotes individuality over and above communality. Advancing this argument further, the perceived communality exhibited by the Umoufia Progressive Union can be taken as an

aberration of the communality in the pre-colonial Igbo society. As a result of their movement from the village setting to the urban landscape, their relationship has become largely commodified, in which case the city is merely a place and not a home.

What seems to be Achebe's penchant for holding strongly to ethnic loyalty finds justification in Postcolonial thought especially in the ideas of Homi Bhabha. In his book, *Nation and Narration* (1990), Bhabha encourages a rethinking of nationalism that stresses the "ambivalence" or "hybridity" that characterises the site of colonial contestation such as the city where cultural differences produce imagined "constructions" of cultural and national identity (ii). Indeed, Bhabha's *Nation and Narration* is an intervention into the readings of nationality for contending that nations are "narrative" constructions that arise from the hybrid interaction of contending cultural constituencies. Bhabha insists that it is impossible to conceive of a nation as a symbolic force and that notwithstanding attempts by historians to construct the nation as a sign of modernity of society, the cultural temporality of the nation is the only element that could establish it as a social reality. According to Bhabha, "nationalism has to be understood by aligning it [...] with large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which [...] it came into being (ii)."

The Puerto Rican writer, Pedro Juan Soto, also challenges what he describes as the sociological superstition of the city as a "melting pot" accusing the city of trying to impose itself on the immigrant by expecting him to deny his own culture (1981,90). According to him, the assumption that once an immigrant arrives in the city, he would adopt and defend the urban culture as Odia Ofeimun (2007, 2), seems to suggest, is unrealistic since the city never manages to define its own culture. Soto asserts that "it's not possible to cut away the roots of any human being" (M. C. Jaye and A. C. Watts, 90), stopping short of calling the city an impostor.

Given Achebe's antecedent in cultural nationalism as well as being one of the leading authors in Postcolonial theory, it is hardly surprising, therefore, that he treats his urban characters in such a way that nearly all of them are reluctant city people. Hence, neither Obi Okonkwo nor Odili Samalu sojourns in the city on account of any real

interest in city life or a desire to become a city dweller. Their presence in the city is a necessity. Obi comes to live in Lagos because the city, being the nation's capital with all the apparatus of government, is the only place where he can put his newly acquired educational qualification to use. In the case of Odili, he is co-opted into visiting the city by his former teacher as he confesses to being fulfilled with his teaching job in the countryside. Consequently, Odili treats a very serious issue of the existence of two opposing cities within one city with levity and unconcern by mentioning it casually. The morning after his girlfriend is seduced by his host; an angry and frustrated Odili takes a walk around the city:

> I met a night-soil man carrying his bucket of ordure on top of a battered felt hat drawn down to hood his upper face while his nose and mouth were masked with a piece of black cloth like a gangster. I saw beggars sleeping under the eaves of luxurious department stores and a lunatic sitting wide awake by the basket of garbage he called his possession (79).

Odili's observation fails to generate the desired believable effect because of the aloofness that is palpable in his narration. It does not seem as if he actually experiences what he describes. His remark that opulence exists side by side squalor in Lagos is made by an obviously mentally detached man who neither speaks nor is spoken to by anyone throughout the walk.

This is perhaps partly responsible for the definite feeling of gloom and despondency that tend to dominate the psyche of Achebe's city-dwelling characters, no matter their level of achievement in the city. His focal character in *No Longer at Ease*, Obi Okwonkwo, elicits the reader's sympathy. Long before his problems begin, Obi cannot be described as a happy man or a contented individual. He appears to be a man perpetually in a trance, deriving no joy from his environment and taking no pleasure in interacting with people around him. He is a confused man without a clear direction in the city. He hates the slums of Lagos with a passion. "I can't understand why you should choose your dressmaker from the slums" (15), he admonishes his girlfriend, Clara, in anger; yet Obi detests the peace and quiet of Ikoyi, his own

place of abode with equal intensity. "Going […] to Ikoyi […] was like going […] to a funeral. For all its luxurious bungalows and flats and its extensive greenery, Ikoyi was like a graveyard" (16).

Beyond what seems to be his principled aversion to the city, however, Achebe also shows concerns about problems commonly associated with the city such as filth, over-crowding, crime and the menace of street urchins. bribery and corruption, forgery, sexual immorality, environmental degradation, high crime rate, youth unemployment, and class stratification, which is very apparent in the city resulting in the designation of certain areas as reserved areas while some are tagged as slums. He seems particularly disturbed by the systemic corruption in the city. In *A Man of the People,* Chief Nanga's life is dominated by corruption and avarice. He pretends to be working in the interest of public good, whereas his relentless effort at ensuring the construction of a road through his village, Aninta, is actually secretly aimed at oiling his own private pocket as "he had ordered for luxury buses to ply the route as soon as it was tarred" (48). Nanga also shamelessly collects bribe from a government contractor and builds blocks of luxury flats with it notwithstanding the fact that he lives in a "princely seven bathroom mansion with its seven alarming water closets"(46). His desperation at retaining his seat in parliament as shown by his effort first at bribing Odili and later at humiliating and destroying him, also shows the depth to which he has sunk in his corrupt tendencies. Honourable T.C. Kobino, another city dweller, is as avaricious and crude as Chief Nanga.

Writing about *No Longer At Ease,* Eustice Palmer (1972) chronicles how Obi Okonkwo, having graduated in England, returns to Lagos and is taken aback by the corruption in the city; how he rejects the suggestion that he should accept 'things' as they are but remains pathetically idealistic rather than show a concrete will to turn 'things' around. The depiction of Obi Okwonkwo as being bitterly disillusioned and frustrated by his own inability to take up a stronger moral position appears to be a literary rendering of Achebe's experience in the city as regards what goes on in the city and the inability of well-meaning residents to make concrete positive changes.

Furthermore, Achebe seems to view Lagos as a 'busybody' city where inhabitants not only drift aimlessly, but also preoccupy themselves with activities which ought not to be of concern to them. On the day that judgment is delivered in respect of the bribery allegation involving Obi, "every available space in the courtroom was taken up;" and "there were almost as many people standing as sitting" (1). City dwellers are depicted as being so nosy that "some civil servants paid as much as ten shillings and sixpence to obtain a doctor's certificate of illness for the day" (1).

Conclusion

In summary, Achebe's city characters lack the confidence of citizenship. They nearly always see themselves as strangers in the city. The protagonists in Achebe's city books also tend to view the city purely from a functional perspective – as a tool for the promotion of personal, regional or ethnic interest – the sharing of the national cake. The climax of Achebe's rejection of the city is evident in the way his hero in *No Longer At Ease*, Obi Okonkwo goes to jail at the end of the novel, and in *A Man of the People*, also, Odili Samalu proposes to found a school in memory of his slain activist friend, Max, in his village, not in the city where Max lived, fought and died (166). The insistence on seeing and responding to the city purely from a functional perspective is accountable for the prayer of the president of Umuofia Progressive Union who wants his kinsmen to partake only in the good fortune of the city, while the misfortune should go to the supposed owners of the city. Instructively, there are no owners of the land in the city. The real owner of the city is the law, and, sadly for the union, the law eventually takes its course on their protégée.

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