

Cultural Apartheid and Modernity in Matthew Umukoro's *Obi and Clara*

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Abstract

This essay examines Matthew Umukoro's exploration of cultural apartheid through the *osu* caste system among Igbo people of Nigeria in the contemporary Nigeria as demonstrated in his play, *Obi and Clara*, a stage adaptation of Chinua Achebe's prose classic, *No Longer At Ease*. This is to call people's attention to the societal retrogression of this evil socio-cultural practice, if it is not addressed. The study adopts critical content analysis of *Obi and Clara*, using Existentialism to argue the connection between the play text and the Nigerian society; probably the lessons presented in the play can go a long way in addressing instances of tribal and ethnic crises that beset the country at present as a multi-tribal and multi-ethnic nation.

Introduction

Matthew Umukoro's *Obi and Clara* is a stage transformation of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, a sequel to *Things Fall Apart*, the most famous creative work on the African Continent. *Obi and Clara* presents an artistic garb of many colours depending on the point of focus. In the present attempt, the intention is to examine the main focus of Umukoro's adaptation which is "cultural anachronism" revolving around the *osu* caste system. Umukoro (2002, p. vi) maintains that

Unlike the earlier novel set in a stable and secure pre-colonial past subsequently prized open and rent asunder by an invading external force, the latter recreates the socio-cultural crisis resulting from the psychological friction between the old order and the new which finds its worst manifestation in our fast growing conurbations.

From the foregoing it is obvious that cultural segregation represented by the *osu* caste system is the focus of his dramatic

adaptation as against the intention of his source material, *No Longer at Ease*, which is 'post-independence life' afflicted by corruption that consequently affects Obi Okonkwo's 'moral sensibility'. The present writer strongly believes that retrogressive cultural practices should be done away with to give room for a 'modern and progressive society'. This is the argument in this attempt to reveal the tragedies of such cultural practices in the contemporary society.

Theoretical Framework

This work adopts Existentialism as its working theory. Existentialism generally maintains that 'existence precedes essence'. It postulates the freedom of existence of all individuals, arguing that every individual in a particular society has the inalienable right to existence that should not be denied regardless of religion, culture, tribe or ethnicity. Nellickappilly is of the view that "most of the existentialist thinkers emphasize the importance of an individual man living his own life, rather than just being a member in the crowd" (2015, p. 2). He further posits that

In their attempt to emphasize the concrete human reality, they suspend all questions on the universal and objective values such as the essence of man, value and meaning, etc. They rather give importance to questions concerning human freedom and choices and other issues related to this like dread, anxiety, etc.

In the argument of Jaspers and Grabau, Existentialism was not a theory originally; rather it was a movement that emerged in the 19th century, seeking 'real' life for people. It also strengthened the significance of individual man in the society. This is the general perception of Existentialism. Man's existence should be sacrosanct without any interference from any quarter. Jaspers and Grabau (1971, p. 4) aver that

People wanted "life," wanted "really to live." They demanded "realism." Instead of wanting merely to know, they wanted to experience for themselves. Everywhere, they wanted the

"genuine," searched for "origins," and wanted to press on to man himself. Superior men became more clearly visible; at the same time, it became possible to discover the true and the real in the smallest particle.

Existentialism thus emphasises the individual existence and essence whereby abstract metaphysics and the systematisation of reality are greatly deemphasised. Jonathan Webber (2015, p. 3) further opines that

Most of the existentialists consider man as an existent subject and not just a thinking subject. They stress on the man who feels, wills, loves, hates and does many other things in the world [...] But most of them were opposed to abstract metaphysical speculations and also to the systematization of reality. There was an explicit emphasis on individuality.

The above opinion by Webber stresses the importance of individual's opinion and view about life and how he or she desires to live. He furthers his argument by saying that "the existentialists have stressed on the uniqueness of the concrete and real as against the abstract and possible. But they do not focus on existence as such, but have given importance to our way of encountering existence" (2015, p. 4). So, what this position of Webber maintains is that individuality is significant.

Jean-Paul Sartre, in a public lecture delivered in 1946, entitled: "Existentialism Is a Humanism", explains the humanistic nature of Existentialism. He posits that the theory possesses humanist instincts as against the opposing views. The reason for the significance of Existentialism is that "it confronts man with a possibility of choice" (1946, p. 2). Thus, Existentialism provides enabling atmosphere for an individual to decide for himself as he also bears the consequences. Sartre (1946, p.3) is of the view that

Man simply is. Not that he is simply what he conceives himself to be, but he is what he wills, and as he conceives himself after already existing – as he wills to be after that leap towards

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existence. Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself. That is the first principle of existentialism.

Therefore, the main effect of Existentialism is "that it puts every man in possession of himself as he is, and places the entire responsibility for his existence squarely upon his own shoulders" (4). Based on the foregoing, this theory will be of importance to probe Obi Okonkwo and Clara and their actions in Matthew Umukoro's *Obi and Clara*. It will, therefore, shed light on why Obi Okonkwo decides to go against the society which eventually leads to his downfall in the play. Consequently, he is responsible for his actions. This is how Existentialism relates to the analysis of Matthew Umukoro's *Obi and Clara*.

The Synopsis of Matthew Umukoro's *Obi and Clara*

The play begins with a prologue that gives an insight into what is going to happen in the play proper. The prologue narrates how a young man, the hero, who is caught in the clash between the old order and the new. The settings of the play are Lagos and Umuofia, the home town of Obi Okonkwo. Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU) in Lagos holds its meeting in the house of their President. The objectives of this Union are: to come to the aid and see to the welfare of Umuofian indigenes in Lagos, to upgrade the standard of living of their members and give scholarship to the sons and daughters of Umuofia to study abroad so as to belong to the comity of towns in social justice and emancipation. Admittedly, these are noble objectives that set a society on the path of progress.

At the beginning, when the first scholarship is to be awarded, they put sentiment aside and give it to the most qualified candidate in the person of Obi Okonkwo from Iguedo village. He has performed wonderfully in his examinations. Obi Okonkwo leaves Nigerian shores for England in search of the Golden Fleece. He is told to study Law so that when he returns, he will help them with all their land cases. But Obi studies English instead. Obi is also told not to marry a white woman and at the end he does not disappoint them. They organise a

grand send-off for him at Iguedo-Umuofia, being the first son in the town to go to the white man's land.

On his way back home after four years of educational sojourn in England, he gets entangled with Clara who has just finished her Nursing course in England as well. She is an *Osu*. Obi is employed by a Scholarship Board as secretary which places him in an enviable position. He could get a car loan, a senior flat apartment at Ikoyi and Lagos Island. Later on, there is stiff opposition from all fronts against Obi's desire to marry an *Osu*, an outcast. It is Joseph, his very close friend that reveals this to the Umuofia Progressive Union with the intention that they would call him to order. When the President attempts it in their general meeting, Obi gets mad at him and vows to draw a line between him and the Union. Before he gets to his parents in the village; the news of Obi intending to marry an *Osu* has already reached them. He knows who does this without being told. He has assured his fiancée, Clara, not to consider the *Osu* thing as an excuse to quit the relationship, but she has made up her mind of what she wants to do.

Obi's parents stand against his decision to marry an outcast, especially his mother who threatens to kill herself if Obi goes ahead and marries an *Osu*. Obi tenders reasons to his father but he remains adamant. He goes back to Lagos and relays the responses of his parents to Clara which makes her (Clara) finally drop the engagement ring that Obi has given her when their relationship is still okay. Obi makes all attempts to avert the action but to no avail. Because of the financial crisis that Obi faces, coupled with the psychological disturbance that he is experiencing, he collects twenty pounds as bribe and that leads to his two-year imprisonment. The Epilogue takes a look at a victim of a moribund tradition who truly loves but is ruined by the anachronistic tradition. The foreign education makes him while the local tradition, his own tradition, destroys him.

Matthew Umukoro's *Obi and Clara*: Revealing the Crisis of Cultural Apartheid

Obi and Clara was adapted for the stage in 1978 as a result of Matthew Umukoro's urge to dramatise the popular Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* on stage. The attempt was to make the novel

undergo stage transformation for secondary school students and larger audiences for better understanding. Umukoro said in an interview that the adaptation was due to the popularity of the novel among students and general readers alike. Chinua Achebe endorsed the adaptation in a personal letter to Umukoro in 1978, and gave approval for its publication, which took place several years later. At its premiere production, it ran for four nights because people were eager to watch the stage re-rendering of Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*.

The thematic focus of the adaptation is significant in Nigeria as the play addresses the problem of discrimination and segregation that was borne of "antediluvian culture" (the indelible social stigma). The obnoxious cultural anachronism has, over the years, affected the supposed dynamic, free, modern and progressive Nigerian society. Umukoro (2002, p. vi) observes in the author's note that:

A community that approves of pre-natal social stigmatisation spanning generations yet unborn, can hardly make the least pretence to social advancement. The focus of this adaptation is therefore not on the seething corruption of a decadent urban life [...] but on the unhealthy perpetuation of an antediluvian culture [...]

The real focus of Matthew Umukoro in *Obi and Clara* is clear, despite the multi-thematic preoccupation of the text, encompassing corruption, love and communal togetherness, among others. All the issues raised in the play are built around the "pre-natal social stigmatisation" (the *osu* caste system) to arrive at a reliable end. Umukoro focuses on the *osu* caste system, a social stigma which long existed among the Ibo before independence. He has posited clearly in the author's note of the play that:

The focus of this adaptation is, therefore, not on the seething corruption of a decadent urban life to which our hero eventually succumbs, but on the unhealthy perpetuation of an antediluvian culture which provides the tragic context for his ultimate moral degeneration (Umukoro, 2002, p. vi).

Elechi Amadi (2005, p. 47), in *Ethics in Nigerian Culture*, expounds on the issue of the *osu* caste system as a form of slavery that was rampant among the Ibo before independence. He explains the status and activities associated with this kind of cultural slavery in Igbo society, maintaining that:

A few slaves served in shrines and were called *Osu*. This class of slaves was sacred to the various gods and was not allowed to mix with the people. They lived apart, usually far into the bush, close to the shrine of their master-god (Amadi, 2005, p. 47).

Obi and Clara portrays the conflict between the old order and the new in the socio-cultural milieu that occurs in the imagined town of Umuofia as it normally occurs in daily life. The game is usually that the stronger takes the day as the weaker will be put down. Obi Okonkwo is the weaker in the play and Umuofian society is stronger than what he determines to fight against. Obi's self-determination simply leads to his downfall.

Obi Okonkwo is a brilliant young man with 'great promise' who is fortunate to be the first Umuofian to benefit from the 'hard-earned money' of Umuofia Progressive Union in form of loan-scholarship. The scholarship is loaned to the beneficiary who is expected to refund the money at the convenient time of four years at the end of his study "[...] so that an endless stream of [...] young ones will be enabled to drink deep at the inexhaustible Pierian Spring of knowledge".

Umuofia Progressive Union has a noble intention towards their brilliant Umuofian sons and daughters. Despite the fact that none of them is rich or a senior civil servant, they still determine to upgrade the status of their people by looking into the future of Umuofia. The Union's President obviously states their aim that "The future greatness of Umuofia lies in our hands. Our ancestors had laboured to make Umuofia great; we must endeavour to make it greater [...]". The President further buttresses the focus of the Union concerning the scholarship scheme in the following words:

Brothers and sisters, when a child begins to walk, it is a sure sign that he will soon begin to run. It is a question of time. At this rate, Umuofia will soon catch up with other tribes and regain her past glory. In no distant future, our monthly meetings will be graced with the presence of our own lawyers, doctors, accountants and even government ministers. Then out there, an impressive row of cars owned by Umuofia's sons and daughters! Let us proceed to light the flame of greatness by awarding the first scholarship under this scheme (*Obi and Clara*, 2002, pp. 7-8).

The house unanimously chooses Obi Okonkwo because of his outstanding performances in his past academic examinations of Standard Six and Cambridge School Certificate Examination. It is even reported that Obi Okonkwo makes distinctions in all eight subjects of the latter examination. This has accorded him the status of "the village celebrity". Obi Okonkwo is given the scholarship with the expectation that he will study Law.

[...] We are sending him to the land of the white man to study law so that when he returns he will help clear our several land cases, and defend us against all manners of social injustice and discrimination which we experience daily in this city (*Obi and Clara*, 2002, p. 11).

Isaac Okonkwo, the father of Obi Okonkwo, gives a lavish send-off for his brilliant son in anticipation of his journey abroad, being the first of its kind in the whole of Umuofia. Obi Okonkwo disappoints Umuofia Progressive Union by changing his course of study to English. The Union is not happy when it gets to know about the development but it concludes that Law or no Law, he will still be "an influential senior servant".

Joseph, a childhood friend of Obi Okonkwo, on Obi's arrival back to Nigeria explains to him that the Union is not happy when it knew that he was no longer studying Law but English. He adds that the various land cases await his arrival. This is the basis of the Union's anger. Obi, in his stubbornness and self-determination (individuality),

does not agree to have done any evil to them since he has the final decision as to the course of study. After all, he adds, he will refund their so-called scholarship that is no more than a loan in the guise of a scholarship.

The Union does not ignore Obi Okonkwo despite the breach of the agreement, and still goes ahead to give him a befitting welcome ceremony, at least being her first achievement of contributing meaningfully to the future of Umuofia by educating her future potentials that will regain Umuofia's lost glory like it used to be during the time of their forefathers. They all dance and drink to Obi's health and success.

The relationship between Obi and Clara grows stronger after their arrival in Lagos and Obi sincerely wants to make Clara his wife, but the knowledge of Clara about her personality presents an obstacle to the marriage. Obi Okonkwo is welcomed back home with lavish celebration greater than his send-off party, in spite of the dwindling health condition of Hannah, Obi's mother. It is observed that the poor health condition of Hannah is rooted in Obi's absence. Hannah confirms it when addressing Obi, her son:

[...] I'm getting better now that you have returned. You should have seen me at the height of my illness. I didn't believe I could survive it. I think your long absence contributed to my illness (*Obi and Clara*, 2002, p. 67).

And now that her health status is expected to be improved for his son's arrival, the proposed marriage of Obi to Clara, an *Osu*, will worsen her situation. Hannah looks forward for the marriage of her son; but Obi has to be diplomatic about it because she must not know that her first son is already engaged to an *Osu*. If Obi engages with any other person, that may not have created any worry because *Osu* is "a hateful thing" according to the general perception held in Umuofia. Clara also acknowledges it as she laments that "[...] my fate was sealed before I was born. I am that hateful thing called *Osu*". This is a glaring indication of how powerful traditional custom is. Therefore, such iron-cast culture does not easily give room for individual existentialist survival. Umuofia community must determine ways and manners that

Umuofians should live by. It is this cultural system that Obi Okonkwo is determined to confront. He has succeeded in one act of self-determination by changing the course of study in London.

Umuofia community also regards *Osu* as leprosy that will definitely bring shame to their generations yet unborn, and as a result they are scared about associating with *Osu* descendants in any form, including marriage. Obi Okonkwo as the existentialist hero in the play determines to defy the old customary belief that he strongly believes to be part of "rusty fetters called tradition". He views that the essence of their education is to transform their society (Umuofia) from the obnoxious traditions like the *osu* caste system to the new generation of the twentieth century. Obi Okonkwo posits that "[...]We belong to the new generation. And we owe it a duty to transform the society; to lead the people rather than being sheepishly led by them". This portrays the hero as being independent-minded.

Obi Okonkwo further admonishes Clara not to give up for the old generation which their society represents but she should allow her education to reflect an ideal society in "the twentieth century, a period of momentous changes." Obi Okonkwo wants to lure Clara too into accepting existentialism that can ascertain their future as husband and wife, notwithstanding the societal construct. Umukoro's view (2002, p. vi) in the author's note is in line with the position of Obi Okonkwo that sheds light on the argument:

The obnoxious tradition of the outcast represented by the *Osu* caste system runs counter to the dynamics of a free, modern and progressive society. A community that approves of pre-natal social stigmatisation spanning generations yet unborn, can hardly make the least pretence to social advancement.

Clara, nonetheless, loves Obi Okonkwo but her concern is the issue of *Osu* ancestry which she believes will militate in no small measure against their proposed marriage. Clara is not radically inclined to accept existentialism as a system of life. The education Obi talks about is one thing but not all the people that go against marrying an *Osu* are illiterates, although they are not as educated as Obi Okonkwo.

The point of the argument is that education is not the only way out for the socio-cultural sentiment called the *osu* caste system. The orientation of the people needs to be changed.

Clara, in the play, is more realistic than Obi for she knows that tradition is stronger than education. However, she ought to have fought alongside Obi Okonkwo, perhaps the duo could have the day in their society. If Clara accepts Existentialist principles of placing one's destiny in one's own hands, that might have helped them (Obi and Clara) to address the so-called 'societal stigma' that has stood against progress and development in the modern society.

Obi Okonkwo is optimistic about the bright future of their marriage believing that they are in their own world. And anybody in their society should not be interested in whether they get married or not. Clara, in her pessimism, sees that their marriage will be a "mistake" that will bring doom to their generations yet unborn:

Look, Obi. Society has a way of making other people's business its own. The moment we marry, poisonous tongues will begin to wag, and we shall become the object of an endless smear campaign. We won't enjoy any peace of mind, unless we could fly literally to the moon for our honeymoon and remain there for the rest of our lives (*Obi and Clara*, 2002, p. 81).

The religious inclination of Isaac Okonkwo, Obi's father and Hannah, his mother, does not stop them from believing in the retrogressive tradition of *Osu*. Isaac himself agrees that Clara's father, Josiah Okeke, is a good man and a great Christian, yet his daughter cannot be taken as a wife because of 'an antediluvian culture', no crime, whatsoever. Isaac does not ignore the bad tradition despite being a Christian, a retired catechist for that matter. Obi calls his father's attention to the fact that the *Osu* tradition is based on ignorance and does not have a reference point in Christianity. His position is worthy of note:

But I still don't understand what makes an *Osu* different from other men and women. Nothing but the ignorance of our forefathers. Why should we, who have seen the light of the Gospel, remain in this darkness? (*Obi and Clara*, 2002, p. 95)

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Isaac Okonkwo remains adamant in disagreement with Obi Okonkwo in spite of his long standing in Christianity. Hannah also threatens to kill herself if Obi goes ahead and marries Clara, an *Osu*. She maintains that "[...] if you do this thing while I am alive, you will have my blood on your head, because I shall kill myself" (*Obi and Clara*, 2002, p. 98).

Clara does not wait to sort things out with Obi Okonkwo at the time he is critically facing financial and emotional crises. She drops her engagement ring in his drawer, showing that the end has come between the two lovers. The stage direction in the play throws more light on this:

[...] Clara goes over to the table, opens the drawer and drops the ring inside. Then she stands akimbo, holding out her now bare left hand to Obi with a mixture of contempt and compassion (*Obi and Clara*, 2002, p. 103)

The conversation between Obi and Clara afterwards justifies Clara's final decision and Obi's determination on the proposed marriage and his critical condition:

Clara: Ex-lover boy, thank you very much for everything. We've finally hit a parting of the ways.

Obi: Come on, Clara, don't be childish. Come and sit down and let's talk things over. I'm the one to marry you, not my parents, not anybody else. Don't make things more difficult for me in my present condition. You should really pity me (*Obi and Clara*, 2002, p. 103).

The Union does not seem happy about what befalls Obi Okonkwo regarding the fraud accusation. They all consider it necessary to stand in for their kinsman by paying for his legal charges after little disagreement as to whether to come to Obi's aid or not because he has over the time demonstrated to be ungrateful to the Union. Nwosu maintains that "[...] We are simply throwing away our hard-earned

money [...] He that fights for a ne'er-do-well has nothing to show for it except a head covered in earth and grime" (*Obi and Clara*, 2002, p. 109). But Joseph strives to convince them as follows:

[...] We cannot cut our nose to spite our face. Obi is one of us whether we like him or not. And we owe our town a duty to secure its good name at all costs. Whatever we do to help Obi in this matter we do to help our great town. For, if Obi is jailed, it is Umuofia that is jailed. And that would be too bad for our image (*Obi and Clara*, 2002, p. 109).

At the end of the trial, Mr. Adeyemi, a legal counsel to Obi Okonkwo pleads on behalf of Obi that the judge should temper justice with mercy. The reasons he tenders are quite noteworthy:

[...] My Lord [...] I want to emphasise that my client simply fell into straitened circumstances and found himself being framed by his adversaries [...] Your Honour [...] The climax of my client's ordeal was when his fiancée, in whom he had placed absolute trust, decided to walk out of his life when the going grew tough for him. That incident totally and completely shattered and devastated my client and weakened his psychological defences [...] A jail sentence for my client at this point of his brilliant career would mean the destruction of a great and promising future, and a sad loss for the nation's public service [...] (*Obi and Clara*, 2002, p. 111-112).

The judge turns down the plea of Mr. Adeyemi and declares Obi Okonkwo, the accused person, guilty of the offence of receiving bribe, a criminal offence under the law of the land. He then passes a jail term of two years with hard labour on him, and without the option of a fine. This is the destructive end of a gracious son of Umuofia who determines to fight against the old order (retrogressive culture of the *osu* caste system) and his society and faces the consequences. Obi Okonkwo indeed faces "the consequent crisis of contradiction" between his education and his tradition. The foreign tradition (education) makes him a promising son of Umuofia in particular and of the nation as a whole, but his own local tradition destroys him

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because of its bitterness. Obi Okonkwo finally succumbs to 'an obdurate society'. The Epilogue reads in part as follows:

Our hero made the epic journey to fetch the Golden Fleece,
As the flaming flower of his family and the pride of his tribe.
Foreign education made him, but local tradition unmade him.
We ask: Is education necessarily incompatible with tradition?
But this tradition has proved to be a hard and bitter one,
Like the death of social justice and moral equity (*Obi and Clara*,
2002, p. 113).

The destructive end of Obi Okonkwo revolves around retrogressive culture of the *osu* caste system. The innocent, brilliant and hard-working Obi Okonkwo is made to suffer because of a cultural dictate that is retrogressive in scope and practice. No society that encourages this type of culture will see the slightest sign of development and progress. Therefore, Umukoro's *Obi and Clara* is a wake-up call against such cultural practice anywhere on the surface of the earth.

Conclusion

Umukoro's *Obi and Clara* shifts from the intention of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* to address another novel and germane thematic construct. This type of message can help any society thirsty of development. The attempt by Matthew Umukoro in *Obi and Clara* is commendable. This is because the contemporary Nigerian society needs to be told the tragedies that surround division or segregation tribally, ethnically, traditionally, culturally and professionally, among others.

A society that will grow in all ramifications must bury 'apartheid' in all forms, not only to solve a love relationship as portrayed between Obi and Clara but to maintain progressive relationship that will ascertain modern development that cuts across all religious, tribal and ethnic classes. Every individual must be allowed to exercise his or her inalienable right to existence to achieve essence in life which is codified in the Existentialist principles. This is what

Obi Okonkwo and Clara (his supposed wife) are denied of that leads to their separation and Obi's imprisonment. Consequently, if it is addressed, it will guarantee sustainable growth and development of the modern time in any society.

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