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Caught Between Worlds: A Spatial-Theoretical Approach to Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Abstract: Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* follows Obi Okonkwo, a young man pulled in opposite directions—between the deep-rooted traditions and expectations of his village, Umuofia and the restless, morally complex world of Lagos, where he tries to carve out a modern life but slowly loses his footing. This paper looks at how these two spaces affect Obi. The impact is not just physical, but psychological as well, problematising his identity and existence itself. The places he confronts reflect his inner conflict. Somewhere he has a desire to honour his roots. Simultaneously, he is also trying to live by the ideals he picked up through his western education. This internal turmoil forms his ambivalence. This article examines how Obi's identity, decisions and ultimate demise are conditioned by these disparate spaces, which are more than just settings. The village represents rootedness, while the city offers ambition and also moral vagueness. The paper refers to spatial theorists, Henri Lefebvre and Edward Soja, to argue that Obi, like a typical western educated postcolonial subject, is trapped in a kind of in-between space.

Keywords: *Spatial Theory*, *Third Space, Henri Lefebvre, Edward Soja, Liminality, In-Between Space*

Introduction

Postcolonial Nigerians experience the psychological and cultural upheaval as they balance the conflicts between tradition and modernity, are examined in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*. The novel centres on Obi Okonkwo, a young man who received his education in England and whose life represents the conflict between Igbo traditions and Western standards of morality, education and social behaviour. Being torn between his community's expectations and the values he learnt in school causes Obi to feel extremely alienated. As Finkelstein (1991) notes, alienation is "hostility felt toward something seemingly outside oneself which is linked to oneself…a barrier erected which is actually no defence but an impoverishment of oneself" (pp. 106–107).

Spatial theory helps us see more clearly what Obi is going through. Lefebvre (1991) reminds us that space is never neutral; places like Umuofia and Lagos carry layers of politics, history and social expectation that shape how people live and think. In this light, Obi is never just moving between locations—he is navigating worlds that pull him in different directions. Soja's (1996) idea of Thirdspace captures this tension: it is a space where contradictions overlap, where "the real and the imagined" coexist (p. 56). Obi's life between England, Lagos, and his village places him in this unsettled zone, never fully at home in tradition nor in modernity. Turner's (1967) notion of liminality —being "betwixt and between" accepted roles—deepens this picture, showing how Obi stands on uncertain ground both socially and morally. Through Obi's character, Achebe portrays the human cost of cultural mixing: the loneliness, the pressure and the quiet struggle of someone caught between different worlds.

Discussion

Obi Okonkwo's story in *No Longer at Ease* is, at its heart, a portrait of alienation—of a young man torn between the world that raised him and the world that shaped him through education abroad. His struggle is not just about career or love; it is a deep psychological, social and moral estrangement. On the one hand, his community expects him to embody tradition, duty and collective loyalty. On the other, his Western education has filled him with ideals of individuality, rationality and ambition. The result is the uneasy space he inhabits: never fully at home in either world. Sidney Finkelstein's definition of alienation as hostility toward something tied to oneself fits Obi perfectly. He carries the privilege of a European education, yet feels out of place in both England and Lagos, and even among his own people in Umuofia. Achebe captures this paradox sharply: Obi's Western education has not freed him, but left him "a beast of no nation."

Spatial theory helps us see why Obi's life feels so fractured. Henri Lefebvre (1991) reminds us that "space is not a scientific object removed from ideology or politics; it has always been political and strategic. There is an ideology of space" (p. 26). Umuofia, for Obi, is not just a village; it is a space of kinship and tradition, where collective duty guides every action. Lagos, by contrast, is a space of ambition and survival, where compromise and corruption thrive. England represents another layer—rational, modern, but rootless. Moving between these spaces, Obi is forced to carry the weight of contradictory expectations. Obi's navigation between them places him in what Edward Soja (1996) calls "Thirdspace," where "everything comes together… subjectivity and objectivity, the abstract and the concrete, the real and the imagined…" (p. 56). He lives in that overlap, pulled in different directions at once, unable to reconcile them.

Victor Turner's (1967) notion of liminality sharpens this picture. Obi lives in-between, never fully belonging anywhere. When he returns from England, his people celebrate him as a hero, but his shirtsleeves and plain English mark him as distant, even foreign. Abroad, he longs for home—asking for Nigerian food in England shows his need for roots—but even that longing is complicated by a growing sense of superiority and critique toward his culture. He is always suspended: both insider and outsider, both son of Umuofia and child of the West. This liminality makes him fragile, unsure of how to move forward.

Nowhere is this tension clearer than in Lagos. Obi begins his career determined to live with integrity, to resist the bribes and corruption that everyone around him seems to accept. For a while, he succeeds. But debts pile up, family expectations tighten and slowly he bends under the pressure. By the time he finally accepts a bribe, it feels less like choice and more like inevitability. As Innes notes, Obi's tragedy lies in being undone by the very image his people asked him to embody: the honest, incorruptible, educated son. Lefebvre's words ring true here—societies produce their own spaces, and Obi's collapse is the result of moving through spaces with rules that cannot be reconciled.

His love for Clara deepens this fracture. Obi believes that education and Christianity should grant him freedom to choose whom he loves. Yet when he seeks to marry Clara, the weight of tradition crashes down: she is Osu, an outcast, and his family will not accept her. His parents' rejection wounds him deeply. As Sakshi notes, he feels suffocated by cultural orthodoxy, cut off from his community. Clara's heartbreak, her abortion and the loss of their future together leave Obi even more adrift. Here, Turner's description of liminality as being "betwixt and between" comes to life—Obi is stranded in a space where no path is open, no authority can guide him, and every decision leads to loss.

By the end, Obi collapses under the weight of it all. Family duty, village loyalty, colonial structures, urban corruption—they push and pull until he breaks. His imprisonment is not just his failure, but a symbol of postcolonial Nigeria's inability to create a space where men like him could thrive. Lefebvre's warning that a revolution without new space is incomplete feels prophetic here: Obi was educated for a role that Nigeria itself had no place for. His existence in Thirdspace, so full of promise, turns into paralysis.

Obi's tragedy is profoundly modern. Unlike a classical tragic hero with one fatal flaw, his downfall is not pride or weakness alone, but the collision of colonial legacies, cultural rigidity, and personal hope. Achebe shows us the cost of living "in-between"—of being suspended between cultures, traditions, and moral codes with no firm ground to stand on. Obi becomes the embodiment of liminality and Thirdspace: a young man undone not just by his mistakes, but by the fractured world around him. His story is both personal and universal, capturing the human cost of postcolonial dislocation in a way that still resonates today.

Conclusion

Obi Okonkwo's life in *No Longer at Ease* shows the loneliness of a man caught between worlds. He stands in the in-between space where Igbo traditions, Western education, and the pressures of a new postcolonial Nigeria collide. What should have been a space of possibility becomes, for him, a place of confusion and paralysis. Lefebvre (1991) reminds us that space shapes who we are, and Soja (1996) describes Thirdspace as a realm of overlapping identities and potential. Yet for Obi, these overlapping worlds only deepen his sense of isolation. His downfall is not simply a personal weakness but the outcome of larger forces—colonial legacies, corruption, and unyielding cultural norms—that leave him with no safe ground to stand on. Achebe presents his tragedy as both intimate and universal: the painful story of one man's failure and at the same time, a reflection of the struggles of a society learning to live between past and present.

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