Navigating the Contradictions of Colonial Citizenship

A Study of Chinua Achebe’s *No Longer at Ease*
Focused on Mr Green and Obi Okonkwo

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Abstract

This thesis studies Chinua Achebe’s novel *No Longer at Ease* from a postcolonial perspective, specifically concentrating on its protagonist, the colonized Obi Okonkwo, and his antagonist, the colonizer Mr Green, using the theories of the literary critic Homi Bhabha. It argues that these two characters are hybrids in their ambivalent contact zone by demonstrating firstly, the coinciding presence of reciprocal feelings of sympathy/admiration and contempt, and secondly, that they are culturally cross-bred individuals. Additionally, this thesis examines the mimicry of Obi and reveals that it can be either strategic or subconscious in nature. It concludes that both mimicry and mockery have the potential to destabilize the structural power-imbalance between colonizer and colonized, thereby challenging colonial authority.

Keywords: postcolonial, Homi Bhaba, ambivalence, hybridity, mimicry, mockery, contact zone, power-imbalance, ‘The White Man’s Burden’, internalised oppression
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1. Introduction

In recounting the personal story of its author, Chinua Achebe, the African postcolonial novel No Longer at Ease (NLE) in effect “narrates the transition from colonialism to postcolonial identity” (Mezu 66). It relates the story of a young Nigerian man caught between cultures and loyalties—diminished by the English colonizer who educated him and misunderstood by his native villagers because of that education.

The term ‘colonialism’ refers to the particular kind of cultural exploitation of indigenous people connected to the expansion of European society from the sixteenth century onwards, where settlements in distant territories were governed from a metropolitan centre (Ashcroft et al. 60). The concept used by literary critics when discussing and examining the cultural and societal consequences of, and reactions to, this colonization is ‘postcolonialism’ (198-199). With the aim of economic domination, Britain and other developed European countries took it upon themselves to ‘civilize’ the primitive Africans of their settlements by imposing on them foreign languages, practices, and religions (Maneck 438). The prevailing imperialistic opinion was that the civilizing of the non-white peoples of the less developed world by the more progressed white nations was a duty and a heavy responsibility, eventually coined ‘The White Man’s Burden’. The concept originates in a poem by Rudyard Kipling with the same title describing this alleged duty (“White Man’s Burden”). During this civilizing process, the European colonizers deliberately obliterated the ‘inferior’ native’s way of life, while intentionally denigrating the educated African witness (Mezu 67).

NLE was published in 1960, the same year Nigeria gained independence, and unfolds during the final turbulent pre-independence years of the 1950s (Jaggi 2, 4). Alassane Abdoulaye Dia calls this period a turning point in African literary history as the clash of cultures, looming deconstruction of the colonial discourse paired with the anxious quest for a new identity inspired African novelists to produce a range of classics—NLE being one (Dia 32). By sharing his story, Achebe hoped to help Africa regain its belief in herself and “put away the complexes of the years of denigration” (Maneck 439).
The arguments presented in this thesis are informed by the ideas of the colonial discourse theorist Homi Bhabha. In the critical analysis of NLE, the theoretical concepts of ‘ambivalence’ and ‘hybridity’ will be applied to the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized—focusing on the characters Mr William Green and Obi Okonkwo. The term postcolonial ambivalence signifies the presence of simultaneous, and reciprocal, feelings of attraction and repulsion between colonizer and colonized. An individual living in-between cultures will eventually adapt to fit in, thereby becoming a transcultural hybrid.

Bhabha stresses that ambivalence is disturbing to the colonizer as it is the effect of the colonizer encouraging the colonized to adopt his values and habits, which produces subjects mimicking the authority effectively mocking the same (Ashcroft et al. 23). Referring to Bhabha’s critique, this thesis will furthermore explore Obi’s mimicry and discuss how mimicry turning mockery might be significant to the structural power-imbalance in the relationship between Obi and the colonizer.

The chapter on Achebe is mainly based on Chinua Achebe: The Man and His Works by Dr Rose Ure Mezu, Afrocentric postcolonial scholar, and Igbo like Achebe. Considering that Achebe’s background and influence on the African postcolonial canon is interconnected with NLE, it aids the interpretation to have a general understanding of the author’s story, eloquently told in Mezu’s book, where she critically examines the corpus of Achebe.

Two more secondary sources will be introduced in Chapter 3: Bhabha’s The Location of Culture, and Postcolonial Studies, The Key Concepts by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin; both used to explain the theoretical framework developed by Bhaba.

NLE features prominently in academic research on postcolonial ambivalence, hybridity, and mimicry, but none of the works focus solely on these concepts in connection with the protagonist, and his antagonist, to the best of the author’s knowledge. This thesis’ contribution to postcolonial academic research will therefore be to provide a deeper character analysis of Obi and Mr Green in this area, and a base for further examination of the power-relations between characters in the novel.
By analysing findings of mutual co-existing feelings of sympathy/admiration and contempt, this thesis argues that Obi and Mr Green are hybrids interacting in a postcolonial ambivalent contact zone.
2. Chinua Achebe and *No Longer at Ease*

2.1 The Author

The first novel by Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart (TFA)* published in 1958, is a classic literary milestone of African writing in English, and one of the 20th century’s most widely read novels (Jaggi 2). Its main character, the great warrior Ogbuefi Okonkwo, grandfather of Obi Okonkwo in the sequel *No Longer at Ease*, is an Aristotelian tragic hero with a flaw that ultimately brings about his downfall when British colonial rule causes turbulence around him.

In his essay “The Novelist as a Teacher”, Achebe writes the following about his trilogy of books *TFA, NLE* and *Arrow of God (AG)*: “I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones I set in the past) did no more than teach my readers that their past—with all its imperfections—was not one long night of savagery from which the first European acting on God’s behalf delivered us” (qtd. in Mezu xi-xii). Although *TFA* is set in the 1890s, *AG* in the 1920s, and *NLE* in the 1950s, all three plots centre around the disturbing contradictions and clashes of cultures, religions, and intentions of the Nigerians and those of the British colonizers resulting in personal tragedies (Bandele xiii, Kandell 2). *AG* was published in 1964 and revolves around the Igbo chief priest Ezeulu whose son becomes a colonialist convert and challenges the Igbo culture he was sent to British school to help protect (Kandell 2).

Chinua Achebe was born in 1930 as Albert Chinualumogu Achebe (Jaggi 2). Raised in Nigeria during British reign in the Igbo village Ogidi, his father, an Evangelical Protestant, taught him in missionary school, while his mother instilled in him an affection for the traditional village culture (Bandele viii). By using his own narrative in *NLE*, Achebe attempted “a revalorization of Africa’s history and culture” (Mezu xii). His driving force was the discovery that his generation of indigenous educated Africans, himself included, were the very ones being depreciated to stereotypical non-human primitives in European literature like Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (xii).
When the author passed away in 2013, he left behind a corpus containing over 20 books (novels, essays, short stories, and poetry), but none more widely recognized than *TFA* (Kandell 1; Achebe, preface *NLE*).

### 2.2 The Novel

The narrative of *NLE* wavers back and forth between Obi’s sympathies and aversions towards the traditional ways of his Ibo village past and the more progressed British colonizers by whom he has been educated and employed.

Before “the white man came and levelled everybody down” (4) Obi’s village, Umuofia, was the proud terror of its neighbours, but the new order demands new strategies and the Umuofian men decide to send their brightest young man to England to be schooled in the law. Obi becomes the first scholarship recipient of the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU), thus, Obi is sent to England carrying with him all the hopes and aspirations of his clansmen. Although the education he is about to receive looks like a gift, it is in fact conditional. In effect, the selection of Obi for the scholarship sets off a series of events that eventually lands him in prison.

While in England, Obi falls in love with Clara, a Nigerian nursing student, and they initiate a relationship on the journey home. When Obi finds out that Clara is an outcast, an ‘usu’, he decides to break with tradition and marry her anyway, ignoring the warnings from his clan and even his sick mother’s threats to kill herself.

Obi becomes the pawn of two worlds. He is educated by the colonialists so that they can use him in their civil service as their ‘interpreter’ of the language and cultural practices of Nigeria. At the same time, his fine education is paid for by the UPU and they consider Obi their representative, and just like the colonizers they plan to use him as their middleman and interpreter. In his efforts to satisfy everyone—his family, his community, his educators and his lover—Obi is forced to take on so many incompatible roles, and is put before too many conflicting decisions, that he ends up spiralling towards his own ruin.
3. Method and Key Concepts

3.1 Method
In the critical reading of *No Longer at Ease*, this thesis will focus on the protagonist Obi Okonkwo and his boss Mr Green, representing the colonized and the colonizer. Through the theoretical framework of Homi Bhabha, it aims to demonstrate ambivalence in the contact zone where the two characters’ respective cultures intercommunicate. To this end, evidence of mutual and co-existing sympathy and/or admiration, together with contempt will be presented. Moreover, this thesis will demonstrate that Obi and Mr Green are postcolonial hybrids, culturally cross-bred individuals living in-between two cultures.

Additionally, manifestations of mimicry and mockery by Obi will be examined and further discussed in relation to how these are significant to the systemic power-imbalance in his relationship with the colonizer.

3.2 Key Concepts of Postcolonial Literary Studies
‘Postcolonial studies’ can be characterized as “the study of the interactions between European nations and the societies they colonized in the modern period” (Bahri 2). In comparison, ‘colonial discourse’ is a concept coined by the cultural critic and literary theorist Edward Said and is the field within which practices, processes, and relationships related to colonialism are discussed (Ashcroft et al. 57). The notion ‘colonial discourse’ is a system of statements made by the colonizer about reality as a created truth that organize colonial relationships (57). Colonial discourse theory was initiated with Said’s acclaimed book *Orientalism* in which he investigates how colonial discourse functions as an instrument of power (57). Building on Said’s theoretical framework, Bhabha proposed ‘hybridity’, ‘ambivalence’, and ‘mimicry’ to be disturbing contradictions within the colonial relationship, at the same time exposing the intrinsic vulnerability of colonial discourse (57). It is these disabling contradictions that are analysed in *NLE*, with the theoretical framework derived from Bhabha’s *The Location of Culture*, where he discusses his concepts and develops his theories. This
book and these theories have made him a central figure in postcolonial discourse theory. Since the prose in *The Location of Culture* is somewhat dense, Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin’s *Postcolonial Studies, The Key Concepts*, an A-Z guide to postcolonial terminology, have been very useful. The definitions in this chapter are based on both of these secondary sources.

The prefix ‘post-’ in postcolonialism is much debated, as the term first signified the post-independence times after World War II but is now commonly used within literary criticism referring to all literature produced during pre-colonial, colonial, and post-colonial times (Ashcroft et al. 199-200). A ‘postcolonial reading’ is thus a method of deconstructive deep reading to examine the cultural and interrelational impact of colonization on works of literature, while equally importantly drawing attention to both colonizer and colonized (204). It has been suggested that by describing the various contrasting cultures and countries by using the word ‘postcolonial’, a homogenising risk arises where the uniqueness of each of the disparate colonies might be neglected (202). However, according to Ashcroft et al., there is no adamant reason for this to happen as the “materiality and locality of various kinds of postcolonial experience are precisely what provide the richest potential for postcolonial studies” (202).

The reciprocal impact of cultural representations, traditions, and practices of colonizer and colonized in metropolis and colony is termed ‘transculturation’ and is thus a phenomenon of the social space where the differing cultures meet and often clash (Ashcroft et al. 255). Bhabha terms this social space, where two diverse cultures interconnect and start to adapt to each other creating a hybrid culture, the ‘third space of enunciation’, while Mary Louise Pratt, also a critical theorist, labels it the ‘contact zone’ (Bhabha 71; Ashcroft et al. 255). This thesis will utilize the concept ‘contact zone’.

3.2.1 Ambivalence

First used in psychoanalysis, ‘ambivalence’ describes the coinciding existence of attraction and repulsion towards a human being or thing (Ashcroft et al. 23). To study ambivalence in a postcolonial text is to examine the complex relationship between the colonizer and the colonized, best described as a combination of sympathy and contempt (23). The colonized is never only or even completely hostile against its colonizer which
makes the postcolonial ambivalent relationship complicated. In fact, complicity and hostility most often exist simultaneously (23). Likewise, the colonizer frequently manifests sympathy and/or admiration, as well as contempt for the colonized, thus evidence of co-existing ‘sympathy/admiration’ and ‘contempt’ between colonizer and colonized in NLE proves postcolonial ambivalence in the novel.

3.2.2 Hybridity

‘Hybridity’ is a term describing the effects of the cross-breeding of two cultures in their contact zone, creating a new hybrid transcultural form (Ashcroft et al. 136). A hybrid individual can thus be said to be a cultural cross-bred trapped between two cultures, oftentimes leading to alienation (Dia 31-32). Ashcroft et al. points out that it is the postcolonial contact zone, where hybridity is constructed, that conveys the meaning of culture and that it therefore is essential to include in the interpretation that postcolonial hybridity is connected to the power-imbalance existing in that same space (136-137).

3.2.3 Mimicry

The concept of ‘mimicry’ deals with the ambivalent relationship that is created between the dominant colonizer and the dominated colonized, where the native is forced to imitate its oppressor’s practices, manners, and ethics (Ashcroft et al. 154). As these fashions and morals were constructed in a remote country for reasons that are unknown to the colonized, the forced interpretation by the unwilling subject can appear parodic rather than precise. However, along with the advancing skills of the subject mimicking the authority, the mimicry can become a tool of power, and hence, Bhabha argues, “mimicry is at once resemblance and menace” (123). He explains that the triumph of the colonial appropriation depends on the multiplication of colonised subjects that mimic the colonialist proficiently. Ironically, when the mimicking subjects succeed in their attempts, the colonizer has created a ‘double’ of himself with a complete opposite agenda capable of distorting the power ambitions of the colonial discourse (Bhabha 123). It is in “this area between mimicry and mockery, where the reforming, civilizing mission is threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double” (123). It is imperative to emphasize that mimicry and mockery, like hybridity, are effects of the power-imbalance that governs the contact zone.
4. Analysis *No Longer at Ease*

4.1 Postcolonial Ambivalence

Since *No Longer at Ease* is a novel describing the effects of colonial cultures clashing, which results in loyalty conflicts within and between these cultures, it is permeated by signs of postcolonial ambivalence. The clash of cultures creates contradictory yet intermingled feelings of sympathy and contempt between the main characters—a combination integral to the colonial condition. There are numerous examples in the novel of Mr Green showing contempt towards the educated Africans. At the tennis club, he loudly tells his friends that it is a ‘fact’ that all Africans are prone to corruption, “‘The African is corrupt through and through” and “‘They are all corrupt” (2, 3). Mr Green continues:

‘The fact that over countless centuries the African has been the victim of the worst climate in the world and of every imaginable disease. Hardly his fault. But he has been sapped mentally and physically. We have brought him Western education. But what use is it to him? (3)

This quote serves as an excellent example of postcolonial ambivalence. The colonizer, Mr Green, shows both contempt towards the colonized African, who he claims has been “sapped mentally and physically”, and sympathy towards the same African with his comments on the African being the ‘victim’ of circumstances out of his control (3). There is also apparent contempt in Mr Green’s statement about the Africans being too stupid and sapped mentally to utilize the ‘gift’ of Western education that the English have brought them. Mr Green, who clearly suffers from ‘The White Man’s Burden’, tries to explain this ‘burden’ to Obi whom he sees as a representative of the educated Nigerians: “in a country where even the educated have not reached the level of thinking about tomorrow, one has a clear duty.’ He made the word ‘educated’ taste like vomit” (76). While displaying contempt in this situation directed at Obi and his kind, declaring that all educated Africans are unable to plan ahead, the bare thought of them making him sick, Mr Green simultaneously expresses sympathy for other Africans in other situations, but seemingly only the very poorest. This display of ambivalent sympathy by Mr Green is made known to Obi by Mr Green’s English secretary, Miss Marie Tomlinson. She has observed that while Mr Green is saying “the most outrageous things
about educated Africans” (83), he also pays for the schooling of his steward’s sons, which exemplifies contempt coinciding with sympathy. Obi has noticed this confusing sympathetic side of his boss, and in turn tells Miss Tomlinson that he has heard from the office messenger boy, Charles, that Mr Green once lied on his behalf and saved him his job (83). Inherent in the concept of ‘The White Man’s Burden’ is an established conviction that colonisation is for the greater good. By maintaining the binary stereotypes behind that concept, Mr Green justifies his job in Nigeria and in a way his own existence as he firmly believes “that the Nigerians need him and other colonisers, because they cannot manage their own lives” (Zarrinjooee and Khatar 233).

Mr Green’s complex ambivalent behaviour puzzles Obi. He counter-reacts with ambivalent feelings of both dislike and admiration when analysing the complicated character of his boss, one he has “firmly decided” not to like but still thinks has “some admirable qualities” (NLE 52, 84). Obi admits to himself that he admires Mr Green for his devotion to duty, as he works hard for the administration of a country which he does not believe in. However, in that same train of thought, Obi ambivalently demonstrates contempt for Mr Green when he ironizes over the conclusion that his boss seems to love an Africa that does not exist anymore,

the Africa of Charles, the messenger, the Africa of his garden-boy and steward-boy. He must have come originally with an ideal – to bring light to the heart of darkness, to tribal head-hunters performing weird ceremonies and unspeakable rites. But when he arrived, Africa played him false. Where was his beloved bush full of human sacrifice? There was St George horsed and caparisoned, but where was the dragon? (84)

In Obi’s analysis of Mr Green, partially quoted above, he also ambivalently takes pity on, i.e. feels sympathetic towards, “the Greens of this century” and suggests to himself to write a novel about them (85). Obi thus simultaneously demonstrates admiration, sympathy, and contempt towards Mr Green.

Mr Green repeatedly manifests preconceived contemptuous opinions of Obi, most likely based on what Obi is—an educated Nigerian. The first time Obi and Mr Green meet in the office, Mr Green gives his new colleague quite a sulky welcome: “Without rising from his seat or offering his hand Mr Green muttered something to the effect that Obi would enjoy his work; one, if he wasn’t bone-lazy, and two, if he was prepared to use his loaf. ‘I’m assuming you have one to use,’ he concluded” (52). Suggesting that a man he has never met could be lazy and stupid is clearly to
communicate contempt. When Mr Green talks about the educated Nigerian, Nigerians like Obi, his words are drenched with disdain. He refers to them as “so-called educated” having a “so-called” university education: “‘You know, Okonkwo, I have lived in your country for fifteen years and yet I cannot begin to understand the mentality of the so-called educated Nigerian” (93). Mr Green continues: “Education for what? To get as much as they can for themselves and their family. Not the least bit interested in the millions of their countrymen who die every day from hunger and disease” (93). While the quotes clearly give evidence of Mr Green’s aversion for educated Africans, they are lined with sympathy for the less fortunate thus uneducated Africans, presumably because he has yet to civilize them, hence they pose no threat to his position. It can be suggested that the reasons for Mr Green’s frequent expressions of hostility towards the intellectual colonized, is simply that he feels threatened by them, that his position as authority is under attack. If this is so, it fits well with Mr Green ignoring the private circumstances of Obi, that his family in Umuofia is suffering gravely from financial distress and should be worthy of Mr Green’s sympathy (44).

Throughout the novel, Mr Green’s feelings towards Obi are mostly contemptible, but occasional evidence of sympathy does exist. When Obi’s mother dies, Mr Green says that he can “take a week’s leave” if he wishes (128). That is the only straightforward kindness Mr Green offers Obi in the novel. Then there are two dialogues where Mr Green manages to open with a few concerned words, giving the impression that he cares for his employee. The first is when he has the kindness to remind Obi to save money for his car insurance, “‘You will do well to remember”, nevertheless seamlessly transitioning to scorning the educated Nigerians (76). The second dialogue where Mr Green displays the same ambivalence happens when Obi comes back to work after being on leave to visit his village: “‘Did you have a good leave?’ Mr Green asked when he saw Obi. It was so unexpected that for a little while Obi was too confused to answer” (122). As soon as Obi has thanked him for his concern, Mr Green returns to his usual contemptuous rant directed at Obi and other educated Nigerians, to whom which he refers to as “you people”, and “people like you” (122). Mr Green continues:

‘It often amazes me how you people can have the effrontery to ask for local leave. The idea of local leave was to give Europeans a break to go to a cool place like Jos or Buea. But today it is completely obsolete. […]’
single Nigerian who is prepared to forgo a little privilege in the interests of his
country. From your ministers down to your most junior clerk. And you tell me
you want to govern yourselves.’ (122)

The sweeping argument of Mr Green, that “no single Nigerian” would ever forego any
privilege in his reach even if his country could benefit from it, is unquestionably a
contemptuous statement.

Obi in turn, is ambivalent in his feelings towards the Nigerians representing his
background and evidently the same group of men Obi would belong to had he not
received an English education overseas. He looks with contempt on the intellectual
capacities of Nigerian ‘old men’, i.e. long-time clerks in the civil service who do not
have Obi’s education, in a similar way that Mr Green looks down on the intellect of the
African in general, and the educated African in particular. Obi calls these old men “so-
called experienced men” and argues that they are “old men who have no intellectual
foundations to support their experience” (16). According to Obi, these natives have
worked their way to the top through bribery, not education. At the same time,
ambivalently, Obi is very proud of his native origin, wishing the colonizers could hear
his villagers making a “great art of conversation” and see the men, women, and children
“who knew how to live, whose joy of life had not yet been killed by those who claimed
to teach other nations how to live” (40).

The findings of the reading suggest that even if evidence of contempt are in
majority, Mr Green concurrently occasionally express sympathy towards Obi proving
ambivalence. Arguments can also be raised that Obi expresses both admiration and
sympathy for Mr Green as well as coinciding contempt further establishing postcolonial
ambivalence in the relationship between the two characters.

4.2 Postcolonial Hybridity

Some of the ambivalent situations mentioned above also demonstrate hybridity, since
the ideas of postcolonial ambivalence and hybridity are interconnected and
interdependent. Both parties involved in a colonial transcultural relationship are affected
by the cultural interaction taking place. When forcing the colonized to adapt to the
culture of the authority, the colonizer will in turn undisputedly adapt to the culture of
the colonized and thereby be exposed to hybridity (Ashcroft et al. 23-24). For instance,
the ambivalence Mr Green exhibits towards the colonized Nigerians, can be said to be
evidence of hybridity for the reason that Mr Green is a long-time local resident of
Lagos, Nigeria and as such actually has quite a few common denominators with the
intellectual locals he so clamorously separates himself from. An English education, a
civil service job, the language, and Nigeria, the list of similarities can be made long.
Still, Mr Green repeatedly distances himself from the intellectual Nigerians, spitting out
words like “people like you” when talking to Obi (NLE 122). Mr Green is a colonizer
who has come to Nigeria to line his pockets and civilize the natives. Nevertheless,
having difficulty fully identifying himself as such, Mr Green hence manifests hybridity
when distancing himself from a fellow British colonialist with the same words, “people
like you” (2). Later, in the same conversation, Mr Green again exhibits hybridity when
stating he is “all for equality and all that” (3), referring to the apartheid situation in
South Africa as something negative. Nevertheless, as Mr Green is currently employed
by the unequal oppressive colonial government of British Nigeria he cannot really be
said to be ‘for’ equality. Taken together, the arguments demonstrate that Mr Green is a
culturally cross-bred individual after living fifteen years in-between two cultures,
alienating himself from his British co-nationals as well as from other local residents of
Nigeria, literally being both yet claiming to be neither.

There is an abundance of examples of Obi’s hybridity. An example of this is
when he says to his old classmate Joseph, “Your Nigerian police are very cheeky, you
know” distancing himself from the Nigerians with the word ‘your’ (59). He evidently
sees himself as something else than Nigerian in this particular situation, however, later
in the story thinking to himself, “What do our people say?” referring to ‘his’ people, the
Nigerians of his native village (78). Obi is an overseas educated intellectual neither
identifying himself as fully or only that, nor fully or only Umuofian, albeit technically
being both. Notwithstanding the fact that he has adopted the manners and language of
the colonizer, he would definitely not say that he is one of them, although it makes him
uneasy noting that the Irish teachers he and Christopher are seeing are “rather more anti-
English” than he himself is (93). Evidently Obi sides with the colonizer instead of the
colonized Nigerians in this situation, again manifesting hybridity. The character of Obi
is a good example of another type of postcolonial culturally cross-bred hybrid than Mr
Green. Obi’s hybridity is partially forced. The colonizers invaded his country and forced
their culture and practices on him. He uses hybridity as a tool to cope with the pressure from the two cultures he is trapped between, creating a new identity for himself. Obi is a hybrid out of necessity but might not always be aware of his hybridity. He can, however, sometimes consciously use it to gain power over a situation. This claim will be developed further in the discussion on mimicry. Mr Green on the other hand, is not a hybrid by force. His hybridity has nothing to do with survival; it is unconscious and solely a result of adapting to the culture he has lived in for many years.

Throughout his life, Obi struggles with the presence of the Christian Bible for he has realized that his Catechist father’s strong faith in which Obi was raised, is the successful result of the colonizer’s campaign to civilize his people (45). He recalls the epiphanic moment in England when he understood this while being lectured by a Member of Parliament on the federation of British colonies in Africa, the Central African Federation (Encyclopaedia Britannica). Despite wanting to cry out: “‘Go away, you are all bloody hypocrites!’”, Obi could not, since he was being lectured by this colonizer in England because the colonizers had arranged for him to go there to be lectured (NLE 45). Obi renounces the colonizer’s God, which is also his father’s God, but cannot announce his wavering faith to any of them out of cultural loyalty to both (45). His actions and inactions are connected to the power-imbalance between him and the colonizer, and his loyalty predicament alienates him from both cultures further establishing him as a hybrid. Alassane Abdoulaye Dia describes Obi’s dilemma as Achebe’s tool, “Hybridity becomes a concern, through which writers address the dilemma of the African. They portray the intellectual who is entrapped in two different cultures and becomes alienated” (31).

Hybridity is also present in the situation surrounding Obi’s wish to marry the nurse Clara who is judged an ‘usu’, an outcast, by the Umuofian traditional culture of Obi’s past, and consequently a marriage between the two is unthinkable. In Obi’s parents’ home, the two diverse cultures of the Ibo and the Christian have adapted to each other over time creating an ambivalent hybrid culture. Obi’s mother, Hannah, despite being a Catechist’s wife, and loyally so, secretly shares her traditional heathen stories with her children (NLE 46-47). Obi’s Catechist father, Isaac, is also a postcolonial hybrid, a devout Christian living in-between two cultures ambivalently wanting to honour the village heathen traditions and therefore tells Obi that he cannot
marry Clara. Obi desperately takes advantage of his father’s irrational hybridity and replies: “I don’t think it matters. We are Christians” (106).

The character Joseph reminds Obi of the life he would have led, had he not gone to England to get an education. It proves Obi’s hybridity that it makes him uneasy to see Joseph identifying as the inferior colonized subject, while Obi identifies as something else, possibly an intellectual. When Joseph criticises Obi for not being humble enough during his job interview, “a man in need of a job could not afford to be angry”, Obi retorts, “Nonsense!” and calls Joseph’s opinion “colonial mentality” (33). Joseph pains Obi when he points to Obi’s hybridity: “he said in effect that Obi’s mission-house upbringing and European education had made him a stranger in his country – the most painful thing one could say to Obi” (57).

This analysis has predictably found evidence of Obi’s hybridity. The reason being that *NLE* is a story about Achebe’s and other intellectual Nigerians’ hybridity, a message about the identity dilemma of the colonized hybrid. In regard to the hybrid identity of Mr Green, he too manages to distance himself from the two cultures he is trapped between, yet somehow belongs to both. In conclusion, there are enough incidences of hybridity in the novel establishing that both Obi and Mr Green are cross-bred transcultural hybrids, albeit different types.

### 4.3 Mimicry and Mockery

One example of Obi mimicking the English colonizer is his frequent use of somewhat posh English expressions. On his return from England when encountering a customs boy in the port of Lagos asking for money, Obi ironically remarks to himself “‘Dear old Nigeria’ upon noticing that Nigeria is still a place where bribery is common practice (25). Later in the story, he thanks Joseph by using the British upper-class expression “‘Good man!’” (27). Obi furthermore lies to Miss Tomlinson in an understating English way and claims that he has a “slight touch” of Malaria (123). It should be pointed out that above evidence of mimicry is parallel evidence of hybridity. When Obi imitates the colonizer after having such behaviour acclaimed, he simultaneously demonstrates hybridity exhibiting his altered way of responding to post-England situations where he would naturally have behaved differently in pre-England times.
To explore the postcolonial concept of mimicry is to coincidingly explore hybridity and ambivalence as they co-exist and are co-dependent, or as Abdennebi Ben Beya describes it: “the process of colonial mimicry is both a product of and produces ambivalence and hybridity” (3). For instance, Obi’s choice of clothes reflects his hybridity; he appears in court wearing a “smart palm-beach suit”, and another time a sports jacket that he bought in England, but he still sleeps in a traditional loincloth (NLE 1, 36, 82). When Obi wears a palm-beach suit or an English sports jacket he is also mimicking the colonizer, an effect of living in the postcolonial ambivalent contact zone where the colonized Obi is being dominated. When the Umuofia Progressive Union (UPU) holds a reception for Obi celebrating his return, he shows up in his shirt sleeves to better endure the heat, which is a major mistake as “Everybody expected a young man from England to be impressively turned out” (25). Again, Obi mimics the colonizer by not wearing the traditional ‘agbada’ or at least a tie, valuing his own comfort higher than showing respect for the members of the UPU. This illustrates his hybridity in two ways. The fact that the heat suddenly bothers him exemplifies that hybridity can be physical as well as psychological. The involuntary heat sensitivity that Obi has developed in Europe marks a distance between himself and his countrymen, however Obi’s choice to embrace that distance and put his own comfort before the show of respect to his group is voluntary and driven by psychological reasons. The same mimicking hybrid situation is repeated when Obi dresses too casual for a UPU meeting and disappoints Joseph who is impeccably dressed for the occasion with “white nylon shirt, spotted dark tie and black shoes” (62). While Joseph’s outfit culturally signals the importance of the meeting, Obi’s clothes are purely chosen for practical reasons and he does not even take notice of Joseph’s dismay.

During his speech at the UPU’s welcome reception, Obi mimics the colonizer when he talks about the value of education: “‘Education for service, not for white-collar jobs and comfortable salaries. With our great country on the threshold of independence, we need men who are prepared to serve her well and truly” (26). Clearly, Obi conveys the words of the colonial administration, completely in line with the colonial discourse he so despises. It is imperative to the colonial power that the colonized believes that the colonizer has arrived to help their country, not plunder it, hence, there is hardly a better mouthpiece to encourage that purpose than a colonized subject. When unintentionally
mimicking the colonizer, Obi demonstrates signs of being a victim of ‘internalised oppression’. To suffer from internalised oppression is to have accepted negative propaganda from an exterior oppressor and started to believe that having certain traits or belonging to a certain group, equals being inferior and undesirable (David 1). The immediate effect of Obi’s mimicking speech is a severely disappointed audience. The UPU have made no secret of their intentions and only helped Obi to go to England so that he could come back and serve their best interests, which basically is to grab what he can from the colonial administration and hand it to the UPU. Through the narrator, Achebe explains that to the colonized Nigerians, the government was “an alien institution and people’s business was to get as much from it as they could without getting into trouble” (NLE 26). The colonial missionaries and administrators cooperated to obliterate the ‘inferior’ native’s way of life and replace it with Western cultural practices that the native was rewarded for mimicking, just like Obi unintentionally did in his speech. However, the intentions of the natives were the exact opposite and therefore, as soon as the colonized subject became good at mimicking, he had the upper hand (Mezu 67). “Ambivalence describes this fluctuating relationship between mimicry and mockery, an ambivalence that is fundamentally unsettling to colonial dominance” (Ashcroft et al. 23). Thus, inherent in the colonial discourse lies the production of its own downfall, according to Bhabha (123).

Not only does Obi engage in straightforward mimicry, he also exhibits signs of strategic mockery. His behaviour wavers between mimicry and mockery during his job interview with the Public Service Commission, where he quickly gathered that “the Chairman of the Commission, a fat jolly Englishman, was very keen on modern poetry and the modern novel, and enjoyed talking about them” (NLE 31). Obi knows how to play this game. He has been encouraged to mimic the English cultural practices, where it is an advantage to be able to impress important people with knowledge of English literature. He mimics the chairman the way he was taught, deliberately mocking the man and the power ambitions of the colonial discourse in pursuit of privileges saved for the colonizer. “The Chairman’s conversation with Obi ranged from Graham Greene to Tutuola and took the greater part of half an hour. Obi said afterwards that he talked a lot of nonsense, but it was a learned and impressive kind of nonsense” (31).
Obi reasons that the only way upwards in the Nigerian society seems to be to tactically mimic the colonizer. “To occupy a ‘European post’ was second only to actually being a European. It raised a man from the masses to the élite whose small talk at cocktail parties was: ‘How’s the car behaving?’” (73). For a Nigerian to get invited to the cocktail parties of the élite and be able to swank about one’s car, the mark of a senior civil servant’s status, was in itself a goal on the way up. The way Obi reflects on the élite and their cocktail parties could also be seen as a mockery of the colonizer’s cultural practices, although Obi certainly does not mock the ticket to get there—a university degree from England. “It was rather sheer hypocrisy to ask if a scholarship was as important as all that or if university education was worth it. Every Nigerian knew the answer. It was yes. A university degree was the philosopher’s stone” (73).

It is hard to acknowledge for Mr Green that the colonized have come so far in their mimicking that some of them actually are entitled to the same benefits as him. He blames Obi for abusing the colonial administrative system by suggesting that educated Africans have too many privileges and therefore should renounce benefits like local leave that was designed for Europeans like him. Obi most deliberately mockingly replies with indignation that that is “for Government to decide” (122). He continues:

‘You devised these soft conditions for yourselves when every European was automatically in the senior service and every African automatically in the junior service. Now that a few of us have been admitted into the senior service, you turn round and blame us.’ (122-123)

As much as Obi regards his boss with contempt, the subconscious internalised oppression Obi suffers from makes him inadvertently mimic Mr Green’s reasoning—the reasoning of a colonizer. During Obi’s first trip back to Umuofia after returning from England, he witnesses the complicated turns of bribery happening between the driver of the mammy-wagon he is travelling on, and the local police. When Obi tries to intervene, he only makes it worse, and more expensive for the driver. Obi is disgusted with what he sees and feels dispirited with the Nigerians in general and mutters to himself “Where does one begin? With the masses? Educate the masses?” He shook his head. ‘Not a chance there. It would take centuries” (35). He then goes on arguing that maybe a dictator could help his country because “what kind of democracy can exist side by side with so much corruption and ignorance?” (35). Pondering this as if he were superior to his own countrymen, mimicking the colonizer, he reminds himself that
England had also been a corrupt place not long ago, using England as the prototype of a more successful country (35). Obi mimics the dominant colonizer to the point of completely disregarding the fact that he too is Nigerian and would also be ruled by a dictator if what he is thinking were to come true.

This analysis has offered arguments for Obi using both mimicry and mockery in the contact zone, further establishing that he is the hybrid that this thesis argues, while noting that hybridity can be physical as well as psychological. In analysing Obi as a postcolonial character, it is important to recognise and understand the loyalty dilemmas that prompt postcolonial cultural hybridity. Preeti Maneck explains Obi’s quandary as him having absorbed the values of the colonizer through the educational system and therefore “believes in the myth of his own inferiority”, so called internalised oppression, and that education both alienates him from his Umuofia brethren and “fails to put him on par with his boss Mr. Green” (439). Considering the effects of cultural hybridity, the conscious and unconscious implementation of it can therefore be vital for the survival of the colonized subject in the ‘in-between’ world that colonisation has placed him in. Dia notes that in NLE, Achebe shows “blatant evidences of the advantages of hybridity” and that hybridity has been proposed by numerous theorists “as a solution to cultural differences” (42). What Dia and other theorists suggest based on Bhabha’s ideas, is that hybridity along with mimicry should be seen as vital tools for the colonized subject caught between cultures and loyalties to ease his predicament, and in the formulation of his identity.

4.4 Resistance by Imitation

Inherent in discussed postcolonial relationship between the colonized and colonizer, is a systemic power-imbalance, as the colonizer has intruded the space of the colonized with the aim of domination. However, the better the subject becomes at mimicking—possibly rising in the ranks of colonial administration—the more he sharpens the tool that when strategically used can shift the power-balance and overturn the dominance of the colonizer. Ashcroft et al. conclude that mimicry locates a crack “on the certainty of colonial dominance, an uncertainty in its control of the behaviour of the colonized” (154). Yet the intrinsic threat in mimicry should not be seen as an overt hostility to the
colonizer, notwithstanding the fact that the colonial culture will always be “potentially and strategically insurgent” (154).

Obi is proficient at mimicking, demonstrated best in the job interview scene discussed above where he strategically and seemingly effortlessly mocks English practices and thus manages to shift the power-balance to equilibrium—occasionally tipping the scales in his favour. He practically takes over the interview from the commission by talking a lot of ‘nonsense’ as he later described it, “but it was a learned and impressive kind of nonsense. He surprised even himself when he began to flow” (NLE 31). Proficiency aside, Obi only uses the power-shifting tools of mimicry/mockery once in his relationship with Mr Green. In general, the power-imbalance is maintained in the immediate contact zone of the two characters owing to the fact that Obi mainly behaves like a quiet covertly dissatisfied employee in the company of his boss. Obi either says “thank you very much” or makes “some vague noises” holding back his reply, and listens patiently to Mr Green’s harangues (122, 93). The only time Obi uses mockery to rattle Mr Green’s authority is when Mr Green rants at length about educated Nigerians taking too many liberties like local leave and accuses Obi of piggy-backing on the regulations that are supposed to serve the Europeans in their hardship (122-123). Obi’s reaction is one of defence, of himself and of the native civil servants of Nigeria, prompting no reaction from Mr Green who arrogantly ignores Obi’s words “you turn round and blame us” and leaves the room (123). In that moment, a shift in power-balance takes place, a shift that moves imbalance towards balance and briefly on to Obi’s advantage. The colonized Obi strategically mimics the colonizer when using his own arguments back at him, redirecting the attention to the flaws of the colonial system devised for the privileged white Europeans like Mr Green. Obi effectively mocks the system Mr Green argues was set up to protect the colonizer. Mr Green’s response could be seen as an effort to regain his power-advantage, but it could well be that he is rendered speechless. This scene is significant to the relationship between the two, as Obi has indicated that he is capable of making the power-imbalance between them fail by using the education the colonizer has provided him with and by imitating him the way he was taught. Obi’s mimicry could thus be said to be significant to his colonial relationships because it has ability to destabilize the systemic power-imbalance.
5. Conclusion

By applying the theoretical framework of the colonial discourse theorist Homi Bhabha to the postcolonial reading of *No Longer at Ease* by Chinua Achebe, this thesis has offered arguments that Obi Okonkwo and Mr Green are hybrids in an ambivalent contact zone. In addition, this thesis argues that Obi is capable of conscious strategic mimicry to mock the authority of the colonizer. This becomes significant to the systemic power-imbalance between them, as Obi also effectively demonstrates that he is capable of destabilizing the power-advantage of the colonizer.

The analysis of *NLE* establishes firstly, the coinciding presence of reciprocal feelings of sympathy/admiration and contempt between the two characters proving ambivalence in their relationship; and secondly, that said characters exhibit hybridity by determining that they are culturally cross-bred individuals, however different types. While noting that Mr Green frequently expresses feelings of contempt towards Obi, and educated Nigerians in general, coinciding feelings of brief sympathy do exist. In displaying these contradictory feelings, Mr Green shows signs of ‘The White Man’s Burden’. He so strongly believes in the positive effects of colonisation that he cannot stop looking for confirmations of Obi and other colonized Nigerians being helpless and irrational without him. Arguments can furthermore be raised that Obi expresses reciprocal contempt for his boss as well as simultaneous admiration and sympathy.

Postcolonial hybridity in *NLE* is exemplified in displays of cultural identity confusion. The culturally cross-bred Obi often distances himself from his nationals while simultaneously at times feeling more English than the Irish teachers. Hybrids typically do not identify themselves as fully, or only, belonging to one culture, emphasizing that alienation is a structural effect of transcultural hybridity. Naturally, there are more incidences of Obi showing hybridity than Mr Green since it is a novel about African intellectuals’ hybridity, describing the effects of the cross-breeding of cultures. Nevertheless, the findings offer enough support to establish that Mr Green is a culturally cross-bred individual living in-between two cultures alienating himself from both his English co-nationals as well as his neighbours of fifteen years, the local Nigerians. Mr Green is both a colonizer and a local yet professing to be neither. Despite
being involuntary, Mr Greens’ unconscious hybridity is not a result of outside force but purely a consequence of adapting to the culture he now lives in. Obi’s hybridity, on the other hand, is more complex as it is partially forced, partially voluntary. It is both conscious and unconscious, sometimes psychological and other times physical. The colonizers forced Obi to adapt to their culture, however, some cultural adaption happened naturally when Obi lived in England. Obi consciously uses hybridity out of necessity when trying to cope with the pressure from the cultures he is trapped between, or to gain control over situations.

The study of the cultural consequences of colonization through the process of postcolonial mimicry, is coincidingly a study of hybridity and ambivalence as they are inter-dependent products of each other. Obi’s use of characteristic ‘learned’ English expressions and choice of clothes bespeak his hybridity as well as indicate how he mimics the colonizer. Due to internalised oppression, Obi sometimes unconsciously mimics the colonialist reasoning of Mr Green in the absence of the same creating the impression that Obi seems to be running the colonizer’s errands.

With the aim of diminishing the native cultural traditions, Mimicking of Western culture and language was encouraged within the colonial discourse. However, because the native had a completely opposite agenda, as soon as he became sufficiently good at mimicking, he challenged the colonial authority by mocking it. Hence, in the effects of mimicry lies an immanent threat to the power-imbalance in the colonial contact zone. Consequently, strategic mockery by mimicry can be instrumental in shifting the power-imbalance and call into question the colonial dominance. Obi demonstrates that he is capable of using strategic mockery to destabilize the authority of first the chairman and later, Mr Green. Furthermore, Obi’s use of strategic and subconscious mimicry and mockery in the novel demonstrates that he is the hybrid that this thesis claims.

Obi is torn between the expectations of his past and the demands of the present, the colonized natives from which he springs and the colonizer from whom he receives his wages. It is this loyalty dilemma that prompts postcolonial cultural hybridity. As hybridity is both a product and producer of mimicry and mockery, together they become important strategies for coping with the identity conflicts that colonialism creates.
This thesis has discussed the significance and effects of the colonized Obi’s use of mimicry and how it can destabilize the colonizer’s dominance in a postcolonial relationship. What this thesis did not examine but instead left for future postcolonial literature studies, is the power-relations within and between the groups of secondary characters in *NLE*, specifically the more progressed educated Nigerians and the less educated traditional-minded. The latter is what the former would be without their English education. In other words, future research might find it fruitful to study the power conflicts that arise when intellectual vanguards like Obi mimic the colonizer in his absence, in effect taking over the power-position of the colonial authority. A future postcolonial study of *NLE* might be comparative and include one or both of the other novels in the African trilogy by Achebe, as each is set in different periods of Nigeria’s colonisation.
Works Cited


