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Journey Metaphor in Achebe's No Longer at Ease



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Journey Metaphor in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

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Résumé

But : Cet article vise à examiner le voyage métaphorique dont les manifestations résident dans une œuvre romanesque de Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*. En effet, le voyage métaphorique constitue pour le personnage principal un moyen de chercher les solutions aux conflits internes et externes dans un récit. Ce voyage a pour objectif, restaurer l'harmonie perdue dans la société. Malgré l'absence d'une réponse satisfaisante, des moyens d'améliorer la société et de résolution des conflits, le personnage principal doit rentrer à la source culturelle.

Méthodologie : Pour mener cette analyse, nous avons lu et relu le roman, puis nous avons procédé à l'analyse de la manière dont le personnage principal a fait face aux défis et comment il les a surmontés. Cette analyse débouche sur la compréhension des changements survenus au cours de ce voyage métaphorique.

Résultats : A l'issue de l'analyse, il a été constaté que ce voyage de Obi Okonkwo a débouché sur un échec notoire, puisque ce dernier a fini par se suicider, alors qu'il était supposé devoir défendre sa société de la domination impérialiste.

Contribution unique à la théorie, aux politiques et à la pratique : Ce papier montre donc que tout personnage fait face aux défis nécessitant une préparation mûre pour atteindre l'objectif visé. L'échec du personnage de ce roman traduit l'échec des colonisés face aux colonisateurs.

Mots clés: *voyage métaphorique, Achebe, facile, rite, image*

Abstract

Purpose: This paper aims to examine the metaphorical journey whose manifestations reside in a novel by Chinua Achebe, *No Longer at Ease*. Indeed, the metaphorical journey is a way for the main character to seek solutions to internal and external conflicts in a story. This trip aims to restore the lost harmony in society. Despite the lack of a satisfactory answer, ways to improve society and resolve conflicts, the main character must return to the cultural source.

Methodology: To conduct this analysis, we read and re-read the novel, then we proceeded to analyze how the main character faced the challenges and how he overcame them. This analysis leads to an understanding of the changes occurred during this metaphorical journey.

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Findings: At the end of the analysis, it was found that this Obi Okonkwo's trip resulted in a notorious failure, since the latter ended up committing suicide, when he was supposed to defend his society from imperialist domination.

Unique Contribution to Theory, Policy and Practice: This paper, therefore, shows that any character faces challenges requiring mature preparation to achieve the intended objective. The failure of the character in this novel reflects the failure of the colonized against the colonizers.

Keywords: *journey metaphor, Achebe, rite, image*

1. INTRODUCTION

A work of art, especially a novel, dramatises characters' change from one reality to a new reality or from one society to a new society. Referring to Tembue Zembele (2005), a novel study the human mind, heart and different hidden aspects of human beings with psychological, sociological or historical overtone depending on the direction the writer wants to take and the area he wants to explore.

We have found worth working on this paper in order to provide our readers with an insight into what is called journey metaphor and how conflicts develop to make it.

Our main concern is to study the journey metaphor in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* which will help future researchers resort to it in the production of new literary works.

About the approaches, structural and sociological directions have retained our attention; the structural approach allows supporting ideas by drawing justification from textual evidences and by looking at its intrinsic values. But the sociological direction has helped us to explain evidences from an extrinsic point of view. The paper stresses the relationship between the structure of the journey metaphor and the social or historical images resorting to both approaches.

1. DEFINITION

The *Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (1963-616) defines metaphor as the use of words to indicate something different from the literal meaning.

It is not easy for people to understand a metaphorical situation since sometimes it is beyond their knowledge. A journey literally involves a travel from a given place to another. It can be calculated in space and in time. In literature "journey metaphor" is simply the development of the central character; it can be compared to a journey that someone can do.

Referring to Daniel Kunene (1985: 67), a journey metaphor is minded because once a central character gets a conflict; he sets himself to resolving it and find a solution. He leaves home (A) without conflict and goes toward home (A1) which marks the beginning of the conflict. He isolates himself to the place of foreign sojourn (B) where he is initiated.

There he may either succeed or fail. If he succeeds, he goes back home to (A2) where the New Harmony will be restored. But if he fails, he chooses where to go.

2. CONFLICT DEVELOPMENT

Normally in Africa, a son does not belong to his parents but to the whole community which affects him morally, mentally and psychologically. Yet, whatever the community, and however its members may behave, there must be some conflicts which may oppose them. In *No longer at Ease*, Achebe depicts the following conflicts in Obi's community:

2.1. Conflict between black and white people

During the settlement of white people, East Africans suffered because their lands were taken by white men by force. Because of the hardships Nigerians faced, they decided to create a party called "Umuofian Progressive Union" whose goal was to defend the community's interests and liberate black people from colonialism. In order to reach that goal they decided to find one intelligent young man and send him to England to study so that at his return he may handle their land cases.

Here is a paragraph which explains it:

"Six or seven years ago, Umuofians abroad had formed their union with the aim of collecting money to send some of the brighter young men to study in England. The community wanted Obi who had been chosen to read law so that when he returned he would handle all their land cases against their neighbours"
p.6.

2.2. Conflicts opposing Obi to the whole community

2.2.1. Disobedience to the community's recommendation to study law

Among the young men found in Nigeria (Umuofia), Obi was selected to be sent to England to study Law. He was thought to be a brave man and serious.

When Obi arrived in England, he did not study law as recommended by his community; instead, he studied English whereas before his departure, he had been told to follow conform strictly to the community's recommendations i.e. to study law, not to forget his culture by following the white men and not to change his behaviour.

Obi was ashamed to arrive in Nigeria because of his disobedience.

"Four years in England had filled Obi with a longing to be back in Umuofia. This feeling was sometimes so strong that he found himself feeling ashamed of studying English for his degree" (p 45).

2.2.2. Refusal to conform to the community's traditions.

Obi's disobedience did not limit to studying law. When he came back from England, he also did not want to conform to his community's tradition, he adopted modernism. This was opposite to what his community expected from him. They had given him a scholarship, they expected him to consolidate his community and traditions at his return from England, but he was now demolishing them.

The scholarship had been given to him as a loan to be repaid, he had to know that it could have been given to someone else and so he had to be grateful to the community which had chosen him and one of the ways he could express his gratefulness was to consolidate their tradition instead of demolishing it. Obi's refusal to conform to his community's traditions is expressed in different ways, among which the following ones:

a) His project to marry an Osu girl.

Each community has its culture, there are things authorised or forbidden by the "culture» and someone can be banned if he does not obey his culture's customs. Before Obi's departure to England wise men from Umuofia progressive Union gave him pieces of advice. They told him that some young men from the society, after arriving in England, forget their culture and are maddened by European customs. They advised him not to flirt with girls because it was forbidden to marry a boy or a girl from another culture. Obi had a girl friend named CLARA from the OSU tribe and he sent his parents a letter to inform them that he wanted to marry her but they did not agree with him.

OSU people were said to be given to idols and therefore were outcast, and Obi's father gave further reasons for opposing his son's project. He told him:

"Osu is like leprosy in the mind of our people. I beg of you my son, not to bring the mark of shame and leprosy into family. If you do, your children and your children's children until the third and fourth generations will curse your memory";p.121.

Leprosy is considered as a very bad disease that someone inherits from his ancestors or parents. It was considered a shameful disease and people who had it had to isolate themselves. The OSU tribe was viewed as leprosy and so for Obi's father, in deciding to marry an OSU girl Obi wanted to bring sorrow and shame into the family for all the coming generations.

Apart from the pieces of advice given by his parents, the president of Umuofia Progressive Union added:

"I have heard that you are moving round with a girl of doubtful ancestry and thinking marrying her ..." p 75.

Instead of thanking the President of Umuofian Community for his advice. Obi gets angry with him and threatens to take him to court for that. Obi's will to marry an OSU brings a great division among the Umuofians. His friend Joseph tries to convince him that he is obliged to obey the community and that he must not quarrel with the President but in vain.

b) Not attending his mother's funeral ceremonies

For a long period, Obi's mother was ill and she was taking modern medicine. She decided to return home in order to make traditional medicine thinking that she would feel better, but unfortunately, she died. This death caused much shame on the family and in Umuofia. In Ibo traditions and everywhere in Africa, if a member of a given family dies, he must be buried after the arrival of all the members of the family; but Obi did not participate in the funeral ceremonies. The community's reaction to Obi's attitude is expressed in the following passage:

"What Logos can to young man?

He runs after sweet things, dances breast to breast with women and forgets his home and his people." (p. 75)

Obi is judged to be stranger to his own customs and no one can understand his attitude as shown in the following words uttered by a member of Umuofian community.

"When someone plants a yam, it produces another yam, and if he plants an orange, it bears orange. He has never seen a banana tree yield a cocoyam" p 145

According to the above observation made by one of the characters, Obi's behaviour at his mother's death resembles that of his father at the death of his grandfather. Obi's father did not care. It is said that both son and father were the same, they were sadist. His father's reaction at his grandfather's death is described on page 145 like this.

"When Isaac Okonkwo heard of the death of his father, he said, those who kill with the matchet must die by the matchet"

For Isaac Okonkwo, his father deserved his death!

2.2.3. Obi's behaviour in the senior civil service

Obi in the senior civil service replaced Mr Omo at the post of Administrative assistant. He was given a salary of sixty pounds a month. He was also given a car. But although he got a good salary, he soon got into many problems. We do remember that he was given a scholarship as a loan to go abroad and that he had to pay back. In addition, he had to care for his family and his insurance and electricity bills. As Obi noticed that he could not solve all those problems without money he rehearsed the different ways he could get money and the only way he found was to borrow money from other people, as seen in this passage.

"In his extremity Obi even though of the president of the Umuofia Progressive Union, but rather than do that he would go to a money lender." p 79

OBI was afraid to ask for money from the president of Umuofia Progressive Union because people would laugh at him; they could not understand how a young man who worked in the senior civil service could borrow money from a man of his family who had less money than

he. Out of shame he resigned and he tried to take some economic provisions in order to reduce and minimise his expenditure as said in the following passage:

“... to give to his star ward Sebastian money to go to market once a week and complaining the electricity by taking off some lamps where it was necessary for him.”(p.79)

2.2.4. Obi’s attitude against bribery.

Obi who is a young man coming from a European school, does not cope with old people who are working in different services. He considers all of them as corrupt, incompetent and anti – democrats. They took bribery and were not even able to render the services for which bribery was given.

“The trouble was not in receiving bribe, but in failing to do the thing for which the bribe was given”P.80.

Obi was determined to replace these Nigerian civil servants by white young boys coming from European schools in order to fight bribery but he was advised to change and behave like a Nigerian civil servant. Bribery was intensified in Nigeria; it was practised even in politics under different forms. For example, in Achebe’s *A Man of the People* (p.58) it is said that, *Nanga corrupts Odili by taking him to marry his daughter Edna.*

Obi’s attitude towards bribery opposed him to the members of his community.

2.3. Conflict opposing Obi to his girlfriend CLARA

Obi, the one who was against bribery replaced old men who were working in different services, it was astonished then when he was weakened by it.

He had a girlfriend, he, who was against bribe. He failed at last and accepted bribe. Apart from the charges, Obi had, his girlfriend felt pregnant and wanted to have abortion. Obi was obliged to go and look for the Doctor who could do it for him but there wasn’t any tradition which would support that action, it was a crime. Obi went to look for the first Doctor who would help him to get that pregnancy out. The Doctor said:

“I’m sorry my dear young man, but I cannot help you. What you are asking me to do is a criminal offence...” (p 132).

The Doctor did not understand why a young man, a Christian as Obi could have such a bad idea.

3. STRUCTURE OF THE JOURNEY METAPHOR

The structure of the journey metaphor is a schematic representation of the way in which the central character travels in order to reach the growth of personality.

According to DANIEL KUNENE (1985: 160), the journey metaphor is developed in four main points:

- (A) Home without conflict, or home with total harmony

(A1) Home with conflict

Home (A) and Home (A1) are psychologically different but physically the same.

(B) Place of foreign sojourn; it is where the success or the failure of the central character is seen.

The central character's success or failure is seen after facing the challenges. It is represented as a circular movement which starts from (A1) home with conflict to (A2) where the New Harmony is restored.

Challenges can occur at any point of the circular movement between "A1 to B" and "B to A2". The point of return (A2) is determined on the basis of the central character's need.

3.1. HOME WITHOUT CONFLICT or (A)

Home without conflict is the time at which the central character is found in a total harmony. During this time, the central character lives in harmony with others and no conflict can be expected to burst out. Among the situations and the stages of the plot that constitute the central character's home without conflict, we can mention the following ones:

3.1.1. Obi before going to England

Obi had been a brave pupil. He had never caused shame to his community.

He passed his standard examination at the age of twelve and he was the first in the whole province. He was granted a scholarship and went to study in Eastern Nigeria where he got his Cambridge certificate with excellence. He was chosen by his community to go to study Law in England so that at his return he could help his community to handle their land's case and to be their representative in other services. He was the son of Isaac Okonkwo, a Christian convert and Honnah. His other name was "Obiajulu" which means "The mind at last is at rest". The name was given to him because his birth was a relief for his father who had so far got only girls as children. Obi was a kind boy; he was different from other boys who spent all their time running after the sweetness of this world.

Obi was against bribery, corruption and every bad behaviour. In his mind, he thought every time about the future of Nigeria. He was chosen to go abroad because of his intelligence and his view of the world. He was seen as the one who would help Umuofia Progressive Union in the future.

Before his departure, he was given pieces of advice since there were many boys from Nigeria who had gone to England and had been corrupted by the sweet things of Europe as stated in the following passage:

"I have heard of young men from other towns who went to the white men country, but instead of facing their studies they went after sweet things of the flesh, some of them even married white women".(p.9)

Umuofia Progressive Union went on giving Obi pieces of advice by saying:

“Do not be in a hurry to rush into pleasures of the world like the young antelope who danced when the main dance was yet to come” (p.10).

Here, the Umuofia Progressive Union wanted Obi behave wisely.

3.1.2. The preparation of prayer meeting which was held to him

Umuofia Progressive Union did not limit to giving pieces of advice to Obi, but they prepared a meeting of prayer for him. Here is what they implored in the song on page 10).

“..... when he is going to the white men’s country, leave him not behind Jesus, wait for him.”

In that prayer meeting the Umuofians wished good to Obi who was about to leave his community. They shook hands and pressed their presents into his bag to allow him to buy a pencil, an exercise book or a loaf of bread for the journey. His departure to England was a great event in Umuofia.

3.1.3. Umuofia

Like other societies, Umuofia was politically organised. They had set a union which kept the name above. This society was made by all people from Umuofia. They were living together, sharing the same view, and had elected a president who wasn’t a dictator but before taking any decision every member should say his opinion.

This society was composed by men of tradition and only Obi’s father was a Christian and was working in the church, as stated on page 8:

“He had been a catechist of the missionary church for twenty- five years and then retired on a pension of twenty – five pounds a year”.

3.1.4. Obi’s scholarship

The community suffered while collecting money to send Obi to England to learn books. Every member of the community accepted the bad life due to this collection of money. The collection of money was a good idea and this was for the proper interest of the whole community.

3.2. HOME WITH CONFLICT or (A1)

Home with conflict is the place where the conflict is revealed. In *No Longer at is Ease*, the conflict is revealed by the following situations:

Obi’s negligence of the pieces of advice given by his society

The community knew Obi as a brave and serious boy, and has a man of good behaviour. They relied in him. Regrettably, when he arrived abroad, he rejected all the pieces of advice he had received and had followed the sweet things of Europe so that he forgot his culture totally. His return was welcomed since Umuofia Progressive Union thought that he was going to do what they expected of him, but at his arrival in Nigeria, he showed the Umuofians

that their culture was wrong. He spoke negatively of their traditions as it can be seen in his following statement:

“Our fathers in their darkness and ignorance called an innocent man Osu a thing given to idols and there after he became an outcast, and his children, and children’s children forever”.

Also, when his mother died Obi did not participate in her burial ceremonies whereas as a worker, he was expected to help his family financially and morally. The Umuofians’ surprise and disappointment is expressed in the following passage:

“This boy that we are all talking about, what has he done? He was told that his mother died and he did not care; it is a strange and surprising....”

3.3. RITES OF PASSAGE or PLACE OF FOREIGN SOJOURN (B)

Rites of passage is an expression of the process through which the central character goes in order to reach the growth of personality. For this purpose, the central character undergoes a number of challenges. From these challenges he moves from immaturity to maturity (*Introduction to Africa literature 1973: 167*).

According to Van Gennep (1960: 75); the central character is measured through different challenges. Sometimes, the central character can succeed or fail the challenges. We notice the success or the failure of the character when he moves from immaturity to maturity.

Obi had a girlfriend named CLARA, a long time ago the girl had felt pregnant necessarily by Obi and so the girl declared to get the pregnancy out. Obi had accepted CLARA’s proposition, immediately he went to see the Doctor who could provoke the abortion. Here is what the Doctor told Obi:

“I shall do it for you if you are prepared to pay my fee, thirty pounds, to be paid before I do anything. No cheques. Raw cash” (p 132).

Obi contradicted himself, when he had accepted this sum of money asked by the Doctor and anyway he had no means to get it easily so this problem led him to take bribe in all acts he posed whereas he fought against it since his arrival.

One day a rich man arrived and said:

“I don’t want to waste your time; he said mopping one forearm and then the other under the wide sleeves of his agbada. My son is going to England in September. I want him to get scholarship. If you can do it for me, here is fifty pounds” p.152.

A. DUPLICATION OF THE CHARACTER

According to *Advanced Learners’ Dictionary* (1963-312):

“to duplicate is to make an exact copy of something or to produce copies of something or exactly alike”.

It is a process of two or more central characters that undergo some identical challenges.

So, in *No Longer at Ease*, the central character, Obi Okonkwo duplicates his father Isaac Okonkwo. Obi's mother's death brought sorrow in the whole community, each member of the community did his best to assist this family apart from Obi who refused to go and participate to his mother's burial whereas he was informed about it. Wherever something stands, another thing stands beside it. The act he posed was identical to the act posed by his father. When Obi's father was informed about his father's death, he did not care of it but he kept saying that those who kill with the machet must die by the machet. That is why the Umuofians' old men said:

“That is why when you plant a yam it produces another yam and if you plant an orange it bears oranges. I have seen many things in my life, but I have never yet seen a banana tree yield a cocoyam” p 145.

B. PATTERNED IMAGES

A pattern is a structure or a given series of actions which are repeated many times in a narrative... The more the characters or actions move from conflict to resolution the more they establish relations with other characters in ordered ways.

Every narrative is made of conflicts between 2 or more characters. In Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*, Umuofians were not at ease during the colonial period since the colonies took their lands by force. As the white men did not have any consideration for black people the Umuofians created a party called “Umuofian's Progressive Society” in order to fight against the coloniser's bad behaviour. Its primary purpose was to collect money to send some of their brighter young men to study in England so that when they return they can handle all land cases against their neighbours as shown on page 9.

“Today we send you to bring knowledge. Remember that the fear of Lord is the beginning of wisdom”.

Apart from this, Obi's father was the only one who believed in God, he thought that the traditionalists believed in idols. So, thanks to this, they did not understand each other. Obi's father had forbidden his children to eat in neighbours' houses because their food was first offered to idols. Indeed, when Obi was from England, he suspects all Nigerian workers to be corrupted and really they were. Therefore, he replaced all of them by young men from European schools as explained on p 35.

“Obi's theory that the public service of Nigeria would remain corrupt until the Old Africans at the top were replaced by young men from the Universities was first formulated in a paper read to the Nigerian students' union in London”.

C. PARALLEL SETS OF IMAGES

A parallel set of images is a series of movements which establish similarities between actions. It is a set of images with actions, characters, places which look alike. They are put side by side for comparison which is made through repetition. The movement of parallelism is seen between Isaac Okonkwo and his child, Obi as it is said above on page 24, the bad behaviour Obi got was from his father.

For instance the fact of being absent during his father's funeral instead of being curious and interested in it. This behaviour was transmitted to his child and this marks the force of heredity. The old men from his society said:

" I say that his father did the same thing; said the first man very quickly, lest the story be taken from his mouth. I am not guessing and I am not asking you not to mention it outside" p 145.

Umuofia Progressive Society chose Obi to send him abroad since he was kind, intelligent and each time he was thinking about Nigerians' Progression, but it was very astonishing for Umuofians to bury his mother when he wasn't there whereas he was informed about her death. Even if he read much, his studies couldn't change his blood. As it is explained on page 147.

" You see that; said the President, a man may go to England become a lawyer or a doctor, but it does not change his blood. It is like a bird that flies off the earth and lands on an ant – hill. It is still on the ground".

The same movement of parallelism is seen between tradition and modernisation.

Before Obi's departure, the wise men of the community used to hold meetings in which Obi was given pieces of advice. They prepared also a prayer meeting in which the members of the community prayed for him.

They wanted Obi not to lose their culture but to behave like a black man not like white men.

"A man who does that is lost to his people. He is like rain wasted in the forest. I would have suggested getting you a wife before you leave"p9.

When obi was coming back from England, he had already forgotten all pieces of advice given, he had rejected the tradition and adopted the modernisation, he said:

"The bible says that in Christ there are no bonds or free" p 120.

D. CONTRASTING SETS OF IMAGES

Contrasting sets of images are the differences between actions, attitude within the central character and within a group of characters.

Contrasting sets of images are actions faced by two or more central characters differently.

In *No Longer at Ease*, contrasting images are developed in the following ways:

- **Obi versus his community**

Then Umuofian community organised itself in order to send Obi to England to study Law. They taxed themselves money which should train him to learn books. This idea was motivated by the suffering in which they were living during the colonisation. The community wanted him to study Law so that when returning he would defend the community's interest, but when he arrived in England, he didn't follow the subject needed by his community, he did the contrary of what he was asked to follow, he followed the English subject.

"But when he got to England he read English; his self will was not new" p 6.

- Tradition versus Christianity

The members of the community were not living in harmony since there were some who supported tradition and others who supported Christianity. Isaac Okonkwo suspected traditionalists for he thought that the traditionalists offered first their food to their idols before eating, he told his children not to accept to eat in neighbours' houses, explained on page 53.

"One day a neighbour offered a piece of yam to Obi who was then four years old. He shook his head like his older and wiser sisters and then said: we don't eat heathen food".

3. Obi versus his father

Obi's father was a wise man of the community, he had educated his child and gave him pieces of advice before sending him to England and after coming back. He tried to show him the power of tradition by showing him what should be done and what should not be done in their culture.

When he heard that Obi was moving round with a girl of a doubtful ancestry and thinking to marry her, he said:

"Who will marry your daughters? Whose daughters will your sons marry? Think of that, my son. We are Christians, but we cannot marry our own daughters" p 121

Even if Obi had received pieces of advice, it was in vain, he had never understood what his father said but he did the contrary of what his father forbade him.

CONCLUSION

This article entitled "Journey Metaphor in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*" has shown the journey of Obi Okonkwo and his adventure outside his community and inside his community. This journey has been a situation of test. Obi Okonkwo's personality has been tested. Strength and weaknesses have been revealed as Obi Okonkwo has been advancing to the place of foreign sojourn. He has undergone a number of challenges in order to reach the growth of personality. It has been for him a way to seek for new responses to the problem of land in Umuofia by learning all the whitemen's wisdom and all their secrets. But unfortunately, Obi's aspirations when he was back from England discouraged the members of Umuofia

Progressive society which had prepared him financially and morally in the achievement of his aspirations.

The journey resulted in a great failure since none of his aspirations was achieved. He wanted to marry Clara but at last they quarrelled. He had to pay his loan to Umuofia Progressive Society but he failed to do so.

He was against bribery and corruption but he took bribes at last. He sided with western culture but at last he was neither for it nor for the traditional one “Obi failed again because he had disobeyed his elders and even quarrelled with his friends and colleagues and so he lived by himself.

Obi’s intention to return home despite the lack of satisfactory answer and means to improve his society by resolving the conflict of land between white settlers and Umuofians is indicative of the basic characteristics of African society which is community – interest.

Nowadays, traditions are forgotten by many people in our societies. European customs have reached every society and the traditional ways of living are neglected. That is the reason why there are conflicts between those who believe in traditional culture and those who side with European culture.

This is the source of disobedience and misunderstanding among the members of a community. This is the case of Obi whose journey resulted in a great failure because he followed the European culture blindly.

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