



EVINCING POSTMODERN AND POSTCOLONIAL FACETS IN GABRIEL OKARA'S POEM 'ONCE UPON A TIME'

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Abstract

Gabriel Okara, "Nigerian Negritudist" has made a mark on African literary scene, and his poetry exposes the conflict of identity after colonization. His poetry designates the diminution of autochthonous ways of life aftermaths of colonization, due to cultural and political domination of westerners. Apparently, the contemporary period is buffeted by European influences even after decolonization. Though contemporary society has made great leaps in all aspects, a huge feeling of incompleteness still exists in the postmodern world. The assertion and claiming of the true African identity becomes arduous for a traditional African man, even though the country is politically independent. It is with the dismay the poet realises that when traditional African culture meets with European culture, it reshapes the perceptions of post colonial African man. The sustaining project of western mimesis and the discordance between real identity and pseudo identity are some of the ironic signs of post colonial times. The hybridity of two opposing cultures makes one's identity spurious. The problematization of identity and the general theorization of the unmasking of authority can be found in both postmodernism and postcolonialism. This paper traces out some of the postmodern and postcolonial negotiations in Gabriel Okara's poem 'Once upon a time'.

Key words: Constructed identity, cultural imperialism, ambivalent psyche

"Postmodernism is simultaneously (or variously) a textual practice (often oppositional, sometimes not), a subcultural style or fashion, a definition of western, postindustrial cultures and the emergent or always already dominant global culture. At the same time, postcolonialism is simultaneously (or variously) a geographical site, an existential condition, a political reality, a textual practice, and the emergent or dominant global culture (or counter-culture)" (Roger Berger). This passage stipulates that both movements attempt to investigate the idea of 'authority' that is an "emergent or dominant global culture". Though the post modern theory exposes the rejection of

absolutism, the current version of western cultural imperialism still exists in post modern society. The post modern way of life makes man sardonic and disoriented. The discerning features of post modernism like fragmentation and indeterminacy have profound consequences. It makes the subject deprive of the ability to locate in one place. Baudrillard uses the term "the cool smile" to delineate the presence of false distance at all places. He writes, "...its smile ultimately encapsulates all its ambiguity : it is not the smile of critical distance, but the smile of Collusion" (Consumer Society, 121). The opening lines of the poem show the status of a postmodern man.

"Once Upon a time, son,
they used to laugh with their hearts
and laugh with their eyes:
but now they only laugh with their teeth,
while their ice-block-cold eyes
Search behind my shadow." (*Once Upon a Time*)

In these lines, the father is longing for the golden days of the past. He tells his son how the people laughed with their 'hearts' and 'soul' in the good old days. Infact, in point of view of Gabriel Okara, the cultural identity of the African has been grimly compromised. As a matter of fact, the present conflict arises from the inability of the decolonized African to reconcile his traditional African Culture with the western modes of civilization.

These lines expose the bleak picture of our current postmodern condition, that is, the loss of exemplary values, genuinity, warmth, faithfulness among people in the contemporary materialistic and artificial world. Nowadays, laughter has become more of a show of teeth and the eyes have become cold. Though the current period is considered as progressive and nonchalant, the hypocritical attitude of people is absolutely evident. Indeed the term 'ice-block eyes' designates the attitudes of people, fully devoid of slightest traces of genuinity and humanity. These lines expound the outcome of colonisation which has destabilised the univocity of meaning at all levels.

"So I have learned many things, son.
I have learned to wear many faces
like dresses - home face,
office face, street face, host face,
Cocktail face, with all their confirming
smiles,
Like a fixed portrait smile." (*Once Upon a Time*)

These lines emblemize that the poet has attuned himself to wear various faces to cope up with the postmodern world of manipulation and calculation. In order to comply with new foreign modes of life, the poet has learnt several things, wearing so many faces like putting on various

clothes. African find himself in a cultural dilemma altogether.

Although the contemporary progressive culture of postmodern era paves the way for various things like equal opportunities, abolishing colonies, same sex rights etc, it has given masks to everybody which cover-up one's true emotions. The people have become cool and sarcastic rather than being original. In a society full of fakes, people become pretenders and hiding one's identity leads to the lack of authenticity, which drives self-deception and resentment. Guy Debord said, "behind the masks of total choice, different forms of the same alienation confront each other." (The Society of Spectacle)

In his well acclaimed book "The Society of the Spectacle", Guy Debord portrays a central notion 'the spectacle' which refers to "the autocratic reign of the market economy which had acceded to an irresponsible sovereignty, and the totality of new techniques of government which accompanied this reign". Baudrillard points out the status of post modern society who have lost contact with the 'real' in several ways. Owing to the supreme hegemony of the controlling system, the man has become incapable of distinguishing reality and simulation of reality. He says "Everywhere, always, the system is too strong: hegemonic" (Simulacra and Simulation). Baudrillard is merely pointing out the factors which have taken over the places of the real in postmodern society. Relying heavily on models and simulations of reality makes the culture artificial, which keeps us away from cognizing the difference between nature and artifice. Indeed, the postmodern principles challenged everything for all kinds of authority all the time.

"And I have learned too
to laugh with only my teeth
and shake hands without my heart.
I have also learned to say, 'Goodbye',
when I mean 'Good-riddance':
to say 'Glad to meet you',
without being glad; and to say 'It's been
nice talking to you', after being bored."
(*Once Upon a Time*)

At times, if one uses an expression 'Goodbye' he might have meant good riddance in

the sense that, in an artificial sophisticated world living a life that is true and authentic become difficult. Confirming to the so-called sophisticated culture, people display no trace of sincerity when they use the expression 'Glad to meet you'. Their 'intended intention' is different. These lines espouse the influence of British culture even after the country is politically independent. These artificial manners are the outcome of the western orientalist projects. Life in the postmodern world is one of incongruity and instability. Thiselton says about the losses of stability in the postmodern world "breed deep uncertainty, insecurity and anxiety. . . The postmodern self-lives daily with fragmentation, indeterminacy, and intense distrust" (The postmodern self)

The constructed identity is one of the significant characteristics of postmodernism. One of key issues of the postmodern era is "we find ourselves 'eager to conform, yet always in some doubt as to what exactly it is that we are to conform to' ". We are "at home everywhere and nowhere, capable of a superficial intimacy with and response to everyone. (Sociology in Everyday Life)

The same view point of postmodernity is explicitly displayed in a recent video track named 'Sincerity is scary', released by popular pop rock band named 'The 1975'. It conveys the same perception about postmodern way of life. This song also exposes the similar postmodern elements which are reflected in Okara's poem. In a way, both the lines in the poem and lines in this particular song can be seen as life in the current progressive world as a cover up act for hiding one's true identity.

These lines in the song, "You lack substance when you say something like, "Oh what a shame" ". (Sincerity is scary) mirror the post modern way of life. Postmodern man's attitude like if "there is a bomb blast in Ariana Grande concert and all we can say is "oh, what a shame!" Michael Jackson passes away due to excessive stress; "oh, what a shame" and we move on". The lack of sincerity and genuinity which is expounded in the lines of Okara's poem is reflected in the lines of song 'Sincerity is scary' as well.

"Feel at home !' 'Come again ':

they say, and when I come
again and feel
at home, once, twice,
there will be no thrice-
for then I find doors shut on me." (*Once Upon a Time*)

The artificiality and fickleness of people nowadays due to cultural integrity is clearly expounded in these lines. Even though people use positive phrases to invite us to their homes, we are not invited again if our status is not measured right. Their falseness is mirrored through these lines. The postmodern ideologies lead to inner multiplicity, lack of continuity in our lives, which make individual human lives worthless in the real world.

In the poem, the recurrent use of 'face' affixed to numerous places shows "The postmodern self in its predicament of constraint" (The postmodern self). In Baudrillard's version of postmodernity "melancholic is the inherent quality of the mode of the disappearance of meaning... And we are all melancholic." (Simulacra and Simulation)

As the child represents enthusiasm, purity, and genuineness, the poet hit by a sense of self-loathing and regret asks his son to assist him to regain his child like innocence. In this poem "Once Upon a Time" this particular line "I want to unlearn all these muting things", exhibits supreme melancholia due to the meaninglessness of the contemporary world.

Apparently, both post colonialism and postmodernism converge in some aspects. Post colonialism takes an attempt to unmask European authority, though Postmodernism makes an attempt to unmask the authority in general. The notion of doubling of identity as well as problematizing of destination are getting challenged in both post modernism and post colonization. "Put another way, post colonialism like postmodernism (and modernism) functions in terms of sexual, racial, class and economic and even stylistic differences , (and are) reducible to the spatial metaphor of a center-margins opposition" (Postmodernism and Post colonialism Tomorrow).

The confluence of Postmodernism and Post colonialism is explicitly evinced in this particular quote. In some aspects, the interception of postmodernism and post colonialism can be seen in problematizing frontiers, theorizing of center margin dichotomy etc. The convergence of Postcolonial theme and post-modernist idea is employed in Okara's poem 'Once Upon a Time'.

Post-colonial literary theory always makes an attempt to delineate the mindset the colonization creates. It focuses on the disconnection the colonized people feel from their identities.

"But Believe me, son.
I want to be what I used to be
when I was like you." (*Once Upon a Time*)

These lines espouse the dismantled status of postcolonial subject. The poet has to relearn his traditional African culture once again, owing to the reason that he has unlearned all the exemplary values of his own past to cope up with hostile society. "It is one of the ironic signs of our time that then Introduction to The Real Me? *Postmodernism and the Question of Identity* should be written by an Anglicized postcolonial migrant who happens to be a very slightly Frenchified literary critic. For in that hybridity of histories and cultures you have the spectacle of the simulacra the corrosive craft of colonial mimicry exposing the limits and borders of the sustaining project of Western mimesis" - Bhabha. Most often colonised people are trapped in invisible colonial exploitation in such way that it becomes strenuous for them to unwrap their mind before society, infact while European introduce their lifestyles and manners in a way to civilize the African community, it deepens the complexities of identity among Africans, further it may lead to transformed life of artificiality.

Even after independence Postcolonial societies struggle with the problem of inclusion and inconsistencies.

"And I have learned too
to laugh with only my teeth
and shake hands without my heart" (*Once Upon a Time*)

To comply with the present circumstance , which is the outcome of cultural integrity, colonial subjects will have to imitate the west. Here the poet expresses his regret for the changes he had to make to come to grips with the contemporary world. "when a colonial state forces its subjects to adopt a new culture and way of life (new laws, new languages, cricket), the colonized person or "subject" imitates the colonizer in such a way as to be almost identical to the colonizer." (The Location of Culture)

"Most of all , I want to relearn
how to laugh, for my laugh in the mirror
shows only my teeth like a snake's bare
fangs !
"So show me, son,
how to laugh ; show me how
I used to laugh" (*Once Upon a Time*)

These lines show the cultural isolation dispossessed colonised man goes through, even after decolonization. He wants his sons to imbibe all the estimable values of the past. He wishes to laugh and smile like in his childhood days. Owing to the clash between two cultures, he has lost openness and pure identity. When the colonial man adopts a mode of cultural assimilation for achieving individual freedom, it leads to anxiety and chaos. Bhabha's famous diction is 'almost the same, but not quite'. These lines exhibit the view that the poet has to strive hard to create a sense of order in the hostile world.

In the conglomeration with Western European cultures, an impoverished post colonial man will have to adopt the lifestyle of alien cultures and roles imposed by others. The cultural alienation due to cultural integrity leads to post colonial chaos and double consciousness. M.S.Nagarajan writes "Colonial encounter, and the disintegration of indigenous culture, the journey of Europeans with native guides, colonial oppression, mimicry, exile, disillusionment, cultural identity, double consciousness, hybridity, unhomeliness and alienation" (English Literary Criticism and Theory).

Delving deeper into the poem, one can see the lines within the poem encompass the attributes of both post colonialism and postmodernism. The

poet's ambivalent psyche, in terms of postcolonial and multiple identity in terms of postmodernism provides us with a knock-on effect that the poem has profound consequences in the contemporary world.

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