



Think India (Quarterly Journal)

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ON

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held on 03 October 2019 and Organised by P.G. & Research Department
of English

S. T. HINDU COLLEGE, NAGERCOIL-2, Tamilnadu, India



newborn culture ruptures inborn nature in gabriel okara's

“once upon a time”

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The ills of the present compel man to look back at the past with nostalgia. Warmth, sincerity and frankness filled the heart and expressed themselves in the several acts of man. There was no loss of trust between man and man. The present, on the other hand, is characterized by mistrust, lack of warmth and selfishness on the part of man. This makes us yearn for the past. The new cultures and civilizations have colluded to unmake man and reduce him into an animal, more or less. The colonization of Nigeria by the British has had lasting consequences on the culture and civilization of Nigeria. The Nigerians tend to forget their tradition and trend the path of the new Western Civilization.. Love was replaced by hate, trust by mistrust, and warmth by its opposite. Man has become selfish and it has spelt doom in human relationship. This forms the background of the poem – “Once Upon A Time.” The poem is in the form of a dramatic monologue, the patient listener being the son of the poet. The presentation is a modest attempt at showing how ills of the present serve as a foil to the goodness of the past.

A people without
the knowledge of

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their past history,
origin and culture
is like a tree
without roots. (Garvey)

Marcus Garvey has clearly inscribed the importance of history, origin and culture. Culture helps the tree of heritage to bind its root in the deep soil. Without culture heritage can be easily uprooted. Delightful memories can be remembered forever. To take delight in one's emotion is actually a kind of respect but the ills of the present compel man to look back at the past with nostalgia. Gabriel Okara's poem "Once Upon A Time" deals with the psychological conflicts of the Nigerian people. During Okara's childhood his country got independence from the cruel rule of the British. Unhappiness, conflicts of rival interest, quest for identity and trauma tear to shreds the Nigerian people.

The poem is in the form of dramatic monologue - the poet sharing his past memories to his young son and expressing his yearnings to possess the qualities of an innocent child. It swings from the present to the past and carries the flashback technique. The poet explains explicitly the difference between reality and fakery. He also overtly writes about his disability to cope up with the Western Culture. The trauma undergone by the poet is clearly expressed. Warmth, sincerity and frankness filled the heart and expressed themselves in the several acts of man. There is no loss of trust between man and man. The present on the other hand is characterized by mistrust, lack of warmth and selfishness on the part of man. This makes the poet yearn for the past.

Okara begins the poem on a nostalgic note: "Once Upon A Time". He tells his son about pure love and true kindness of people: "they used to laugh with their hearts" and "they used to shake hands with their hearts." The new cultures and civilizations have colluded to unmake man and reduce him into an animal more or less. Okara describes the pleasurable past and painful present. The poem clearly indicates the disability of African American while undergoing cultural conflicts. Startled with the newborn culture, the poet



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himself is forced to follow it. Though the poet is not satisfied with the new culture, he learned to pursue it. "So I have learned many things, son. I have learned to wear many faces"(130). At this juncture the display of multiculturalism is crystal clear. The behaviour of the poet exemplifies with the "Salad Bowl Theory." Joshua DeLorenzo writes:

According to the Salad Bowl Theory there are times when newly arrived immigrants do not lose the unique aspects of their cultures like in the melting pot model, instead they retain them. The characteristic of each culture are still identifiable within the larger American society, much like the ingredients in a salad are still identifiable, yet contribute to overall makeup of the salad bowl. (DeLorenzo n. pag.)

Like the ingredients in the salad bowl, Okara also adapts to the new culture without giving up his inborn nature. And so he is worried about his trauma within. His flexibility with the new culture is aptly marked:

And I have learned, too,
to laugh with only my teeth
and shake hands without my heart.
I have also learned to say, 'Good bye,'
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.(Okara 130)

The poet has learnt to act according to the society. The quest for identity that has reminded buried in the deep crevices of the mind churns out conflicts of sorts. Cultural alienation has left behind a trail of scars on the Nigerian psyche. The poet representing the Nigerians in the immediate vicinity and man in the outer periphery is left yearning:

But believe me, son.



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I want to be what I used to be
when I was like you. I want
to unlearn all these muting things.

It is a throw-back to and reminder of Wordsworth's observation and lament: "Heaven lies about us in our infancy!" "Whither is fled the visionary gleam?"

The African Americans have experienced intolerable hardships. The poet uses such words as 'hearts,' 'eyes,' 'teeth,' 'shadow,' 'hands,' 'smile,' 'dress' and 'face' – words pregnant with and full of physical connotations. The postures assumed by the Whites against the Blacks range from the physical threats to the psychological torments. Survival against the odds so stacked is really hard, driving the African Americans to the unfriendly walls of depression. The 'ice-block-cold eyes' represent the unfriendly and cold approach of not only the Whites but also of the modern man in general. "Feel at home," "Come again" are invitations awash with deception, implying isolation and alienation.

Colonization has impacted the Nigerians to the point of no return. The change is for the worse. Man has lost all the good qualities he once possessed. He has learnt many bad things at the cost of good things. These things or qualities are now possessed by the innocent child whom the poet sets up as his role model: "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!" The simile is telling enough to convey the poison in the smile of the modern adult. The poet is fed up with his transformation or change for the worse. So he wants to unlearn certain things and relearn something else. Childhood is bliss. Normally the child looks at the adult for a model. Ironically enough, here the adult looks at the child for a model.

The Nigerians stand for and represents modern man who has lost his innocence and happiness in the wake of modernism. Adrift in a sea of confusion, alienation and trauma, man seeks an island of innocence, happiness and bliss. The poem ends on a note of hope and a bright future. Thus newborn culture ruptures inborn nature.



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