



Gabriel Okara's Once upon a time: A poem of nostalgia

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ABSTRACT

Okara's poems tend to reflect the problems that African nations face as they are torn between the culture of their European colonizers and their traditional African heritage. He also looks at the traumatic effect that colonisation and de-colonisation can have on the self and on one's sense of personal identity. As such, Okara often depicts characters suffering from 'culture shock' as they are torn between these two irreconcilable cultures. On the other hand there is an important message about the loss of youthful idealism and the corrupting influence of age and money.

KEYWORDS : Culture, European, Colonizers, Colonization, De-colonisation, Self, Identity, idealism.

INTRODUCTION

The poem is a personal monologue explaining personal experiences. It is written in the form of a dramatic monologue to add to the realism of the father's conversation with his son. The entire poem has the man talking to his son. There are no other voices in the poem, and the son remains mute throughout the entire poem. Actually the poet, struck by a sense of self-loathing and regret, turns to his son in his time of need and asks him to help him unlearn whatever he has learnt and help him regain his childlike innocence. The poem begins with the well-known words 'Once upon a time', suggesting that what the speaker is going to say is a fairy tale. This makes us believe that expression of true emotions is so rare nowadays that it practically is a fairy tale. Therefore, it is implied that the speaker is nostalgic about the past. As a result the speaker is torn between the world of experience and the world of innocence. In the olden days, opines the speaker, people would 'laugh with their eyes' 'where as in the contemporary world they 'only laugh with their teeth'. 'eyes' can be associated with honesty and truth, a representative of a person's emotions and feelings, and due to the fact that they are 'only' laughing with their 'teeth' shows that the laugh is fake, Just a cover up- a part of socializing. The metaphor stating that their eyes are now 'ice-block-cold' displays that people are now emotionless gives an impression of no human emotion-almost psychopathic. Moreover, with the word 'cold' it further underscores that they feel no warmth or love for others.

Furthermore, with the use of words of 'used to' and 'gone' in contrast to 'now' shows deep division between his past and present life. At the same time these words lend an atmosphere of nostalgia and tone of sadness. By employing metaphor 'shake hands without hearts' the poet superbly creates an image of gesture that is carried out without care and hollowness 'indeed' suggests fact: there was certainly a time when honesty played an essential role in his life, so this emphasizes how time changes people as they grow up.

The poem is laden with literary techniques and their effect. Repetition – 'laugh', 'eyes', 'teeth', 'hands', 'hearts'-emphasizes physical attributes to do with the body. Compound words – 'ice-block-cold', 'homeface', 'officeface'-emphasizes falseness. Metaphor – 'used to shake hands with their hearts'- is used to compare his old life with his new life. Simile – 'shows only my teeth like a snake's bare fangs'- is used to make strong comparisons that his son will understand and, in some cases, find shocking or scary. Allusion – 'Once upon a time...' is used to add a fairy-tale or nostalgic feel. Moreover, short sentences, punctuation marks and enjambment are all used to underscore the urgency and seriousness of his message but also to keep it simple for his son to understand.

The man is constantly complaining and lamenting on the change he sees in his culture as well as himself. But in the end of the poem, the man still sees the 'ray of light' in his son, who has not been affected by this negative change and asks him to help him unlearn what he has learnt and regain his childlike innocence once again

By addressing his son the poet is actually addressing all the adults of

the modern world who have lost their innocence and are artificial and sometimes heartless in their behavior. The poem is, therefore, a satire on the falseness in modern society. The poet expresses this by using contradictions and interesting expressions such as people 'laugh only with their teeth', 'shake hands without hearts', 'their left hands search my empty pockets'. By using expressions such as 'wear many faces' to show that people behave differently and have different attitudes in different situations and with different people instead of being one's true self the poet brings out that people in modern society are like actors changing masks on a stage and acting in a play. There is no connection between their actions and their feelings. This is a serious problem in modern society but the poet criticizes it in the true style of a satire. He is trying to tell them to relearn from their children how to be natural and honest and sincere.

Although the poem begins on a negative tone but it ends with a positive one. The speaker is constantly complaining and lamenting on the change he sees in his culture as well as himself. But in the end of the poem, he still sees the 'ray of light' in his son, who has not been affected by this negative change and asks him to help him unlearn what he has learnt and regain his childlike innocence once again.

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