

Diasporic Consciousness in the Poem of Gabriel Okara's "Once Upon a Time"

Dr. S. Veeramani

M.A., M.Phil., Ph.D.,

St. Joseph's College (Autonomous), Tiruchirappalli – 620 002,

Tamilnadu, South India

veeramanitheory@gmail.com

Abstract:

Homeland diaspora is one of the taxonomies of diasporic concept. The poem "Once Upon a Time" written by Okara is flashing out the homeland diasporic conflicts. This poem is generally categorized as a piece of post colonial writing. On taking a different mode of interpretation, the concept of Diaspora is traced out in the poem.

Keywords:

Diaspora, ambivalence, post coloniality, psyche, nostalgic.

Introduction:

Gabriel Okara is an influential post-colonial writer of Nigeria. Post coloniality is the term widely used by the aboriginal people. Aboriginals and indigenous, and autothronics people are found in Canada, Malaysia and Australia. By the advent of colonization aboriginals and indigenous people have lost their identity; even in their own land. There is a cultural contamination

in the above said nations. In the own land the literary writers have been trying to bring

back their own native cultural practices through writing literature constantly, but yet to reach the pinnacle of their aim. Post colonialism has paved a concrete path towards diasporic concept to be emerged. Because of certain ratiocinations and analogical ideas:

- a) Settlers contaminated the aboriginal cultural practices
- b) Aboriginal people / indigenous people lost their identity
- c) Autochthonous people met dilemma with trauma
- d) Amalgamation of culture with technology.

Therefore, diasporic concept is also the reverberation of post-coloniality. At the outset the term Diaspora means that the Jewish people wandered and they wanted to settle somewhere (Wisker, 26). Besides, the aboriginals or indigenous people were forced to divorce their land to disperse some other foreign lands. In common, it is practiced in making "slave trade". African people settled in various places of various countries, by the "slave trade".

In the countries colonized by European, U.K. and USA people have the condition of practicing 'double-personality', 'double -culture' and "confused – self".

In her book *Key Concepts in Post Colonial Literature*. Wisker notes that:

What is diaspora existence? For those who have immigrated to another country or who travel between adoptive countries and their original homeland, it could mean always feeling a little displaced, duplicitous, operating with a double personality and cultural identity, perhaps either managing a rich culturally diverse self, (Wisker.26).

Diasporen concept is prevalent not only in the country, where Aborigines are forced to leave and settle somewhere, but also even in colonized countries, where aborigines have to encounter the 'mixed' or 'double culture'. When the autochthonous people face difficulties to adopt both the cultures.

It is better to mention here that not only the native culture loses its own cultural value, but also the new cultural entrant loses its. By forcing people of native to practice and adopt the new culture, the very cruel attitude of 'forcing' loses its cultural values. Under the cultural change, both the cultures have been contaminated.

The postcolonial writer Gabriel Okara has disseminated the diasporen quality in his postcolonial poem "Once upon a Time". Though the poem *Once upon a Time* a remarkable piece of postcolonial writing, it depicts the conceptual quality of diaspora. Under the diasporen concept there are cultural diaspora, language diaspora, Slave diaspora and Home land diaspora.

It is a serious and diabolic, if a person feels and faces himself as homeland diaspora in his or her own land itself. This ideology is portrayed in the poem "Once upon a Time". Okara in the beginning

expresses that there is a drastic change in one's personality, culture and behavior by fixing the title 'Once upon a Time'.

*Once upon a Time
they used to laugh with their hearts
and laughed with their eyes:
but now they only laugh with their
teeth,
while their ice-block-cold eyes
search behind my shadow.*

The words such as 'Once upon a Time' and 'but now' state that there is a drastic change and gap between the relationship between the 'historical past' and the 'historical present'. History lives because of the cultural or behavioral change. The author denotes that people have changed their attitude from 'warmth' into 'cold' 'unwelcoming'.

*There was a time indeed
they used to shake hands with their
hearts:
but that's gone, son.
Now they shake hands without
hearts
while their left hands search
my empty pockets.*

The second stanza expresses the people of his place have transformed into 'cunning'. The poet sadly expresses to his son that the people are for materialist world and they are after material. It clearly states that the colonizers have contaminated the cultural behavior.

The fourth stanza deals with the different behaviors.

*So I have learned many things,
son.
I have learned to wear many
faces
like dresses – homeface,
officeface, streetface, hostface,*

*cocktailface, with all their
confirming smiles
like a fixed portrait smile.*

The above stanza echoes that the poet feels that he has lost his own 'identity' in his own place. He has learnt to masquerade his face with a different behavior. Even if he wants to show his real 'identity' in his own land / place, he becomes 'strange' and 'unknown'. He becomes a homeland diaspora. He is struggling between his own 'fictitious behavior' with other peoples' 'fake behavior'. In his own land he meets the diasporan behavior. As Wisks states that diaspora would meet the 'double-personality', 'double-character'. When someone loses his own 'identity', he/she has to embrace 'double personality' to survive. Therefore, in this aspect 'homeland diaspora' is portrayed.

In terms of cultural changes widely with technology an individual can never stand on his own doxa. So that he says that in the beginning he was reluctant, but he has learnt many faces like wearing dresses.

*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.*

*But believe me, Son.
I want to be what I used to be
when I was like you, I want
to unlearn all these muting things.
Most of all, I want to relearn*

*How to laugh, for my laugh in the
mirror*

*Shows only my teeth like a snake's
bore fangs!*

The above two stanzas expose that the poet himself has changed his behavior. Moreover, the poet is entangled with the technique of 'ambivalence'. Ambivalence means that it is a psychological term. In human psychology a person, who is mixed with two different personalities especially with two opposite qualities. Homi Bhabha has used this term in referring to post colonial critical discourse. And it is used to refer to mimic through colonizer's language.

(Wolfreys, 293)

The speaker in the poem says that he is influenced by the peoples' different faces. He also reacts with their own behavior to survive. This ideation shows that he has lost his own identity totally in his own homeland.

By asking his son to teach him how to laugh and he wants to relearn how to laugh. The poet is entangled with ambivalence psyche. He knows how to laugh but wants his son to teach him means that he is now mixed with two 'cultural faces'. This gives a knock-on effect that he lost his own culture of homeland and 'identity'.

References:

- Wisker, Gina, *Key concepts in Post colonial Literature*. England: Palgrave, 2007
- Wolfreys, Julian ed. *Introducing Literary Theories: A Guide and Glossary*. UK: Edinburgh University Press, 2001.