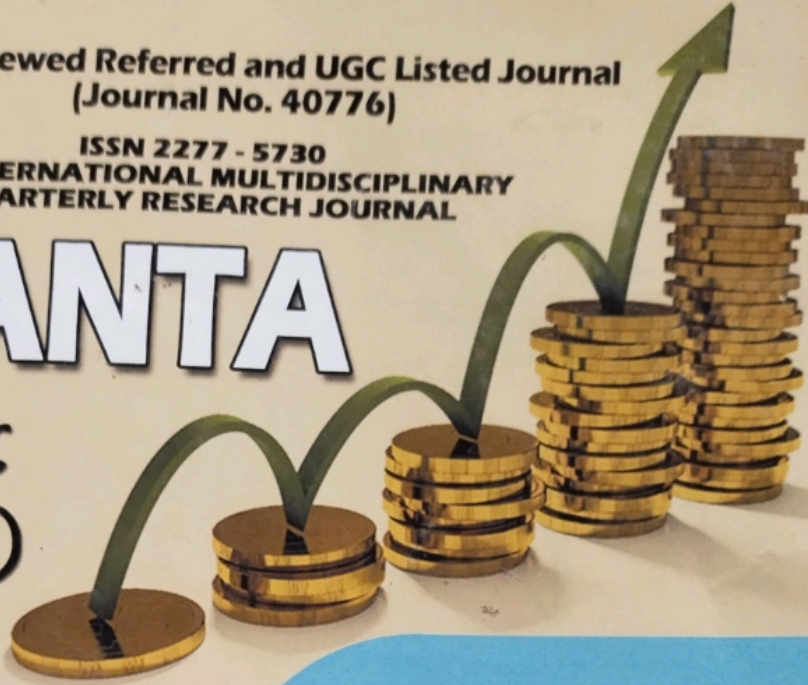




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1. African Identity and Human Values in Gabriel Okara's 'Once Upon a Time'

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Abstract

Any Literature is the product of times. It is about people, their experience, their actions, thoughts emotions, joys and sorrows. Today we are in the world with lot of developments and innovations. But it is the time for us to examine ourselves regarding the changes endured on us. Hence on testing ourselves, one can analyze the losses encountered by the mankind. Gabriel Okara, the Nigerian poet, in his poem 'Once Upon a Time' voices out on the degradation of African culture in modern world. He expresses his agony by dramatizing a dialogue between a father and son. He represented father, who has great respect for African ethical values and his son represent modern man, who is pretentious. This paper focuses on the changes endured on the modern world and their consequences. Thus it throws light on the importance of African human values and emotions to the younger generation.

Keywords: African Identity, ethical values, mankind.

Introduction

Gabriel Okara an African poet was born in 1921 in Nigeria. His Literary contribution converted him into a poet of outstanding ability. He succeeded in capturing the moods and manners, sights and sound of his country. 'Once upon a Time' is a narrative poem that reflects how the African's sense of his/her identity is affected by European culture. The poem explains what happens when a traditional African culture meets the onslaught of the western way of life. This encounter showed its effect on religious background and social life. It claims that 'they' in the poem refers to the western people, who are white.

The father in the poem regrets the compromises he has made and that have resulted to the loss of his dignity and pride. The poet looks back at a time in the past when people were honest, sincere in their dealings with one another. He regrets about the behaviors of the people now. He say that he wants to see the frankness of people that existed long time ago. The poet expresses his sadness comparing his laugh to that of a snake. However as he has come back to his senses,

he is yet determined to unlearn all these muting things Europeans have introduced. The poem is structured in a way that it paints the old customs and compares it with the ideals of the westernized society.

Awareness and Identity

The poet is aware of his African identity and he is aware of the potential changes that have occurred to him and in fact to his fellow Africans. Africans have adopted the culture that is not in line with their core African values. As he becomes aware of the loss of his African identity he wants to sharply take a U-turn and go back to correct the mistake he has done. He is determined to regain the honesty he had in everything he used to do. He says to his son.

“Show me son
How to laugh; show me how
I used to laugh and smile
Once upon a time when I was like you.”

Showing his determination to regain his lost sense of African Identity, he adds;

“I want to be what I used to be
When I was like you. I want
To unlearn all these muting things?”

Effects of European Culture

Ever since the coming Europeans to Africa, Africans have adopted many things from Europe. Initially, Africans were sincere, in everything they do; they showed passion for each other, but now hypocrisy has become the way of life, the person regrets and longs to go back to his natural African identity and culture. He wants to behave the way he used to behave. The poet says;

“But believe me son
I want to be what I used to be.”

Hypocrisy

Hypocrisy can simply be defined as pretending to be what you are not. Moreover through the poem the poet shows the highest level of hypocrisy that Africans have inherited from Europeans. The current situation shows that there are people who show you a happy face while deep in their hearts they are filled with hatred towards you. They outwardly say good bye but deep in their hearts they mean Good-riddance. They say they are glad to meet you while in fact

there is no gladness in them, and they will say it has been nice talking to you while they mean that you have actually bored them. This is hypocrisy of the highest order. The father says to his son

“I have also learn to say Good Bye

When I mean Good riddance

To say glad to meet you

Without being glad; and to say

‘It has been Nice Talking to you’ after being bored.”

The speaker tells us that he has learnt to deal with this fake, insincere, world by changing himself to one of those people. Like others he too hides his real feelings. He says that has learnt “to wear many faces like dresses.” Just like people keep changing dresses to suit different occasions, the poet has learnt to behave differently in different situation.

Compromise/Cultural Alienation

Furthermore through the poem the poet shows that Africans have compromised their culture in favor of the new western culture. They have compromised to good values that held Africans together and gave them a sense of identity and togetherness such as kindness and sincerity in what they do or feel. Today they wear many faces depending on the occasion but without feelings in the heart.

“I have learn to wear many faces

Like dresses-home face

Office face, street face, host face, cocktail face

With all their comforting smiles

Like a fixed portrait smile.”

The poet shows that even their smiles are fake ones because they keep smiling even when they don't mean it. They look like a smiling picture fixed on the wall that keeps smiling as he has now come to his senses and discovered the compromise has made, he wants to unlearn these things and go back to the basics.

Struggle for Change

The poet is struggling for change. He calls upon the Africans to be aware of where they came from, where they are, and where they were supposed to be. The poet shows a sense of regret due to the fact that Africans are gradually losing their good values and identity unawares.

This is a wakeup call that will invite all willing Africans to go back to embrace our good values. In past whenever people meet each other after a period of time, they shake hands as if they are rejuvenating their relationship and friendship. While shaking their hands, they used to joint their hands which symbolize the union of their hearts. But in the modern world, we like to shake hands only with rich and affluent people.

The poet ends the poem by presenting this dislike to live such a pretentious and fake life. He no more wishes to wear masks according to the situations and to hide his real and genuine feelings and emotions. So he pleads his son to teach him how to laugh with innocence and purity in feelings and emotions. The poet, here, truly regrets for his fake behaviors and pleads for regaining childish innocence in his thoughts and deeds.

Conclusion

Thus through this poem, Okara brings out the honesty, sincerity and true emotional intention practiced by the people in the past time. Even though they were illiterate, they were true to their words and deeds. But the modern African man has lost to African culture. This lack of ethical values in the society give rise to problems like terrorism murders, wars etc. Hence it is our duty to nurture human values love, compassion, kindness, sharing emotional touch etc. in our younger generation. Thus we can mould the future representatives of the country through educating them the ethical values. This moral values can only chisel the world with peace and love.

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