



A Plea For Human Values In Gabriel Okara's "Once Upon A Time"

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ABSTRACT:

Today we are in a society with lot of developments and innovations. But it is the time for us to evaluate 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 human ideals in the modern world. He expresses his plea by dramatizing a conversation between a father and a son. His characters in the poem represented two generations; one with great respect for ethical values and the other with disguises and pretensions. This article focuses on the changes endured on the modern world and their consequences. Thus it throws light on the importance of human values and emotions to the younger generation.

KEYWORDS: degradation, ethical values, innovations, mankind, plea

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Education is an efficient method through which one achieves knowledge, skills, experience and attitude. It moulds the character of a person. It insculpts an individual to be cultivated, enlightened, well-bred and experienced. The main aspiration of education is to develop the ideals and values in human life. We are living in the 21st Century, where there are lot of developments and the illiteracy rate of the country has been falling down. But at this juncture, we are forced to question ourselves, whether we are truly educated? Whether our education nurtured our idea and human values. Billy Graham says, "When wealth is lost, nothing is lost; when health is lost, something is lost; When character is lost, all is lost" (web). Thus he portrays the importance of character and ideals than wealth and health.

In Gabriel Okara's poem "Once upon a time", he presents the degeneration and demoralization of the modern world. He sketches the poem in such a way, that it pictures a lively conversation between a father and a son. In this poem, the poet illustrates the changes undergone by the society. He distinguishes the practice of ancient men and the modern refined men. The poet presents the father as a victim of the modern society. The poem is structured in a way that it paints the old customs and compares it with the ideals of the westernized society.

The poet begins the poem as if telling an old story and he remarks, "Once upon a time" (1). As a father, the narrator makes aware of the importance given to the human values by the ancient society. He exclaims that the forefathers used to laugh with their hearts and eyes on seeing a person. The laugh from their hearts can be witnessed through the intellectual eyes. This shows that in the past human relations are indexed by sincerity and open heartedness. But in the modern world, people just expose their teeth as if they are laughing. Meanwhile their eyes remains "ice-block cold eyes" (5) which indicates no liveliness and joy. This shows there is lack of emotional attachment between the human beings.

In the 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 join 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. He portrays this as, "now they shake hands without hearts/ while their left hands search/ my empty pockets" (10-12).

In the third stanza of the poem, the father speaks about the insincerity of the invitation in the modern society. At the ancient times the people invites the guests and made them feel as if they are at home. But in the modern times, we hate the guests and we close our doors to prevent their interruption. Thus the father conveys his son the new ways taught in the modern world to handle situations. He says, "I have learned to wear many faces" (20). Men in the present society are educated in such a way to bear different faces as we change dresses according to the functions and places. He equates his attitude of a man posing for a photograph with occasional smile. He also portrays the new practice that the modern world taught him as:

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. (25-32)

The poet ends the poem by presenting the fathers dislike to live such a pretentious and fake like. He no more wishes to wear masks according to the situations and to hide his real and genuine feelings and emotions. He intends "to learn all these muting things" (36) and "to relearn/ how to laugh" (37-38). So he pleads his son to teach him how to laugh with innocence and purity in feelings and emotions. The father, here, truly regrets for his fake behavior and pleads for regaining childish innocence in his thoughts and deeds.

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 are illiterate, they are true to their words and deeds. But the modern man with the all sort of education and technological skills regrets all the importance the intensity of the human values. With developments and civilization, we have truly neglected the basic ideas of human beings. This lack of ethical values in the society give rise to problems like terrorism, murders, wars etc. Hence it's 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 value can only chisel the world with peace and love.

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