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Between Emotional Truth and Strategic Social Behaviour: Fear, Distrust, and the Loss of Inner Self in Gabriel Okara's "Once Upon a Time"
A Critical Close Reading through Winnicott's True Self and False Self

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The goal of this study is to investigate the conflict between emotional authenticity and socially strategic behavior in Gabriel Okara's "Once upon a time." The speaker of the poem recalls a time when laughter, handshakes and social relations were real, but the present day has a more complex ambiance of smiles, polite actions, social masks and conflicting polite words. This paper brings together the literary analysis of Showkat Hussain Dar, Chukwuma Azuonye and Sajeera Cholakkal to psychoanalytical theories developed by D. W. Winnicott, Erving Goffman and Frantz Fanon within the context of postcolonial discourse and the sociologies of performance theories. The paper examines the process of cultural dislocation, institutionalized hypocrisy and modern social pressures that result in psychological fragmentation and the creation of an adaptive False Self. A stanza-by-stanza close reading examines how fear, distrust, and ambivalent moral sentiments result in emotional distancing, and how the speaker's journey is a quest to "unlearn" the "deceptive socialization" and find his "True Self" again.

Keywords: Gabriel Okara, "Once Upon a Time", emotional authenticity, strategic social behaviour, True Self, False Self, postcolonial identity, Erving Goffman, psychoanalytic criticism, socio-cultural alienation.

Introduction

Human social behavior is subjective psychology and the external society's expectations intertwined. People social behavior is the combination of internal psychology and external society's expectations

(Goffman; Hochschild). In an ideal interpersonal communication setting, affect is given free rein, free expression, free movement but in the institutional context of modern, especially contemporary, times, people are encouraged or even required to control, mask or perform affect. Ideally, affect is free to exchange, free to express, free to move in interpersonal communication, but in the institutional context of modern, especially contemporary, communication, people are encouraged and sometimes compelled to control, mask or perform affect. When old modes of communication and expression in the traditional community are superseded by a pace of modernization, the urban alienation and movement towards colonialism, the expression of emotions is often replaced by a more calculated decorum (Fanon; Achebe; Ndebele). Such a split between inner experience and external expression creates a very deep psychological rift, which changes the interpersonal trust and weakens the individual moral sense (Laing; Winnicott).

This is an existential encounter between interiority and social performance that often takes place in the space of literature (Taylor; Trilling). This tension is developed in Gabriel Okara's groundbreaking poem "Once Upon a Time", in which a poem of introspection using a dramatic monologue is presented by an elder speaking to his son (Azuonye; Ngũgĩ). The speaker is filled with tender memories of a pre-capitalist, pre-colonial age when the speaking was done emotionally: smiling, shaking hands, greeting, laughing were ways of showing an authentic warmth (Dar; Wright). The opposite position is the contemporary postcolonial region where gestures of smile seem to be superficial and reduced to a mask for transactional purposes but also where social gestures represent opportunistic motives, to the extent that they disguise them (Cholakkal; Bhabha).

This shift of emotional spontaneity to strategic social adaptation calls for a number of critical questions about identity formation and psychological survival. People develop psychological defenses to counteract the challenges of social insecurity, fear of vulnerability and mistrust of institutions (Freud; Horney). Social adaptation becomes a survival mechanism and one which is severely psychologically damaging- atrophy of authentic affect and division of the self (Winnicott; Fromm).

Although literary studies on the Okara poetry have centered on the postcolonial satiric tradition (Azuonye), on the discourses of nostalgia (Dar), and on the cultural hybridity (Cholakkal and Egudu), there is still a need to explore the exact psycho-behavioral mechanisms leading to the emotional fragmentation of the speaker in the poem. This study is a contribution to the analytical void by bringing together concepts from psychoanalysis, D. W. Winnicott's True Self and False Self with concepts from sociology, dramaturgical performance (Goffman) and post-colonial alienation (Fanon; Memmi).

Literature Review

Gabriel Okara's poetry, and especially "Once Upon a Time", is read by both academics and critics from a postcolonial perspective, an African humanist one, and a psychoanalytical perspective of identity (Nwoga; Palmer).

In the opening lines of "Once Upon a Time," Dar sees the piece as a dramatic monologue in which the nostalgic regret stands in stark contrast to contemporary duplicity ("laugh with their hearts" v.

"laugh with their teeth") (447). Dar shows the impact of colonial acculturation upon the traditional African sense of communal solidarity, replacing organic, communal relationships with formalist politeness in the European tradition (447). This evolution is consistent with the general postcolonial parallels offered by Achebe and Ngũgĩ that cultural imperialism distorts natives' psychological integrity and imposes a sense of alienation through its socio-cultural norms.

In his view, Azuonye considers the poem as a postcolonial satire, one that is organized around a homiletic discourse of the father to the son (4). Azuonye emphasizes the formal envelope pattern of the repetition of the fairy-tale theme "Once upon a time," which emphasizes the tragic inability to readily retrieve the lost "cultural innocence" (7-9). Importantly, Azuonye shows how the poem registers a disconnect between the language at the surface (everyday social expression: "Glad to meet you," "Feel at home") and language beneath it, which reinforces decorum and excludes human access (8).

Cholakal reads the text through a postmodern and postcolonial prism, seeing the speaker's evolving identities as the manifestations of the trauma, anxiety, and socio-economic insecurity of colonialism (276-79). It is in this context that Cholakal argues that the postcolonial subject must take on a "pseudo-identity" to live in a hyper-capitalist and fractured

social matrix (277). This view is reflected in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, in which he describes the subjugated subject carrying out alterity and the adoption of split identities in the face of the dominant socio-political. This is echoed in Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, which explains how the subjugated subject performs alterity and how split identities are internalized by the subjugated subject in the face of the dominant socio-political.

The poetic commentary of Okara is further grounded in the theoretical literature in parallel. The parallel sociological literature provides more theoretical support for the poetic observations of Okara. Erving Goffman's dramaturgical theory suggests that people consistently play on the "front stage" in which they make choices about the roles they play, the "dresses" they put on, or the "faces" they show in order to meet social expectations and hide what is happening on the "backstage." Arlie Hochschild further extends this idea with the notion of "emotional labor," which describes the need to suppress or deny the emotions that arise in them to express the socially needed emotions. These models are illustrated with Okara's poem, and when applied to his text, they show a difference in strategic social behaviour between interpersonal courtesy and a structural demand. With these helpful readings, however, the focus in the current scholarship on the poem's social masks is predominantly political satire or cultural criticism, and the psychological hurt—particularly the systemic suppression of the authentic self is under-theorized. This study tackles this limitation by using the psychoanalytic paradigm of Ego Distortion proposed by D. W. Winnicott, which is applied to the text of Okara in the context of fear, distrust and emotional recovery.

Theoretical Framework: Winnicott's True Self and False Self

This analysis is structured around D. W. Winnicott's psychoanalytical theory, which he developed in *The Maturation Processes and the Facilitating Environment*. Winnicott proposes that the "True Self" is the "feeling real", feeling, genuine, creative, spontaneous and authentic part of personality based in a feeling of "feeling real" (140–52). The "False Self," on the other hand, grows out of "True

Self" in response to threats, traumas or invalidations from the environment through compliance and external adaptation (140–52).

Winnicott describes a spectrum of False Self organisation:

Healthy False Self: A polite, socially adapted exterior which enables a person to manoeuvre through society without losing his or her internal integrity or access to True Self spontaneity.

Defensive/Pathological False Self: A dominant defensive facade that totally supplants or suppresses the True Self, leading to pervasive sense of unreality, emptiness, futility, and depersonalization (148; Laing; Erikson).

In Okara's use of Winnicott's poem, the remembered past is the part of the poem that has no inhibition (laugh with their hearts). Living in the modern social world, the False Self is developed, the "learned to wear many faces". In addition, this paper uses Goffman's dramaturgical performance theory and Fanon's analysis of postcolonial alienation to explain why the social environment is so hostile as to require such defensive psychological splitting

Theoretical Continuum of the Text:

[Remembered True Self] → [Socio-Colonial Pressure] → [Adaptive False Self / Masks] → [Internal Alienation & Distrust] → [Mirror Crisis] → [Desire to Unlearn / Reclaim Spontaneity]

Methodology

This study utilizes qualitative textual analysis based on critical close reading, with highlighted imagery, metaphor, syntax, stanzaic structure and tone in Okara's seven stanzas. The analysis is dynamic on three levels of interpretation:

Linguistic & Structural Analysis: Logical analysis and distinction of poetic tropes, contrasts, enjambment and stanzaic progressions.

Critical Synthesis: Integration of existing literary scholarship (Dar; Azuonye; Cholakkal).

Psychological Application: Application of Winnicott's True/False Self dichotomy with a condition of the performance theory from Goffman and a postcolonial critique from Fanon to assess the emotional fragmentation of the speaker.

Critical Close Reading

Stanza One: The Loss of Heartfelt Expression and the Cold Gaze

The opening stanza establishes the poem's temporal and emotional binary:

*Once upon a time, son,
they used to laugh
with their hearts
and laugh with their
eyes:*

*but now they only laugh
with their teeth, while
their ice-block-cold eyes
search behind my shadow. (Okara 1–6)*

The first sentence 'Once upon a time' brings into mind "fairy-tale" discourse, and the use of it means that there is no real emotional warmth, it is now myth or distant memory (Azuonye 4; Dar 447). When the "son" is addressed, it is creating an intergenerational conversation so the child becomes an uncorrupted witness to the father's confession (Wright).

The conflict is expressed as an anatomical synecdoche. Laughter "with their hearts" and "with their eyes" represents

emotional oneness, in which bodily expression reflects inner emotions (Winnicott 145). Lacking in the interior, 'laughing only with their teeth' is a mechanical exteriorization, a physiologic act, a 'pantomime' of laughter.

The first metaphor "ice-block-cold eyes / search behind my shadow" creates a feeling of great paranoia and watching. The coldness is the lack of empathy (Fromm) and the searching "behind my shadow" the suspicion and the economical calculation. As Dar points out, the eyes no longer radiate warmth but instead they assess the other as a threat or a product (447).

This transition represents the development of an "impingement" in the environment, in Winnicottian language (148). The social environment, suspicious and cold, makes it dangerous to express the True Self. People turn inward and towards others, shielding themselves by masking their feelings with a smile using "teeth" and building up a protective False Self face.

Stanza Two: Transactional Gestures and Economic Distrust

The second stanza expands this critique from facial expression to tactile contact:

*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. (Okara 7–12)*

Historically the handshake has been a universal symbol of trust, peace and mutual recognition (Mauss), it becomes a place of opportunistic exploitation. The difference between shaking hands with their hearts vs without their hearts emphasizes how hollow are modern social gestures (Goffman).

The "left hands search / my empty pockets" image shows the hidden motivation behind this social hypocrisy: materialist calculation within the modern economic system (Marx; Polanyi). Physical

greeting is a distraction and the opportunist left hand is busy counting the speaker's wealth or status. The transactional aspect confirms Cholakal's statement that the sense of identity in the modern poem is influenced by socio-economic insecurity and distrust (277). In the hyper-capitalist or ruptured postcolonial society, human relation is converted into its usefulness (Buber; Habermas). Shaking hands without hearts is a good example of a functional False Self functioning in the service of social manners, for self-preservation or material gain.

Stanza Three: Institutionalized Hypocrisy and Expository Exclusion

Stanza Three explores the performative nature of language and hospitality:

*'Feel at home!' 'Come again':
they say, and when I come
again and feel at
home, once,
twice, there will
be no thrice—
for then I find doors shut on me. (Okara 13–18)*

There is a problem with the polite formulaic speech that is militaristic, and Okara is hit by it. The polite formulaic speech is militaristic, and Okara suffers from this. The imperative phrases "Feel at home!" and "Come again" create the appearance of radical hospitality and belonging to the community (Derrida). But, literally taken by the speaker, the socio-linguistic illusion breaks down: "there will be no thrice— / for then I find doors shut on me.

The speaker's psychological disillusionment happens at these lines, with the lines crossing. The physical closure of the doors represents social rejection, territoriality and the modern individualism (Sennett) created by these artificial divides. Language here is wholly divorced from purpose (7-8), as Azuonye notes.

From a psychological standpoint, the more one is exposed to insincere hospitality, the more the relational insecurity and paranoia increase (Laing). If a person is asked to do something they cannot do, and then does something that is different from that request, they will come to understand that being vulnerable results in humiliation. Thus, the speaker has to give up the notion of true communion and embrace instead adaptive strategies of self-defense.

Stanza Four: Plurality of Masks and the Dramaturgy of Selfhood

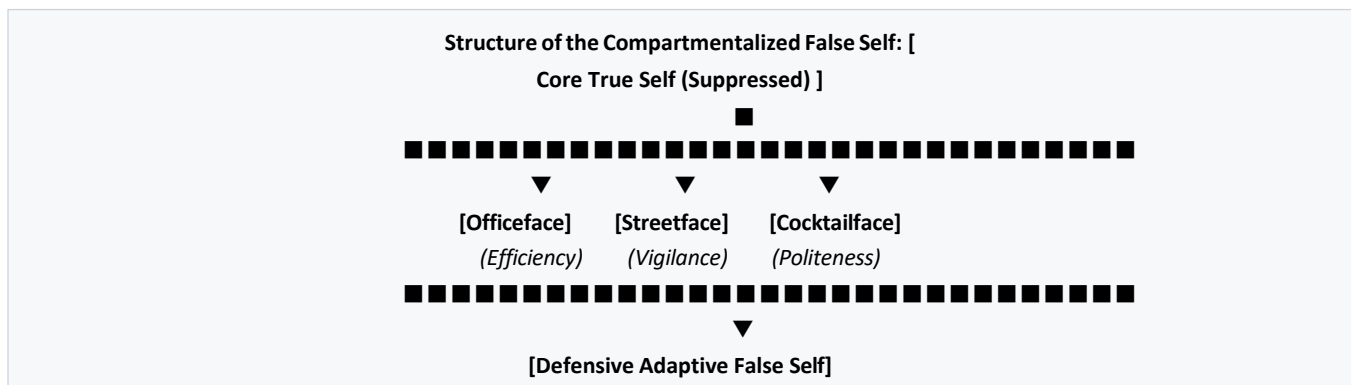
Stanza Four represents the structural pivot of the poem, as the speaker admits his own active participation in this performative culture:

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

*cocktailface, with all their
conforming smiles like a
fixed portrait smile. (Okara
19–24)*

The verb "learned" underscores that artificiality is not an innate human trait, but a socialized habitus acquired through cultural conditioning (Bourdieu). The simile comparing faces to "dresses" highlights the instrumental, interchangeable nature of modern identities. Identity is no longer an integrated, authentic essence, but a collection of superficial costumes donned to satisfy situational demands (Goffman; Butler).

The compound nouns "homeface, officeface, streetface, hostface, cocktailface" delineate the compartmentalization of the modern subject across distinct social spheres. Each environment demands a specific affective mask. The culminating phrase, "conforming smiles / like a fixed portrait smile," evokes rigidity, lifelessness, and artistic artificiality.



This stanza exemplifies Winnicott's concept of the pathological False Self in which compliance replaces authenticity

(147). The speaker achieves social survival, but at the cost of internal fragmentation. By wearing "conforming smiles," the speaker protects his vulnerable interiority, but simultaneously alienates himself from his authentic core.

Stanza Five: Internalization of Hypocrisy and Moral Conflict

In the fifth stanza, the speaker confesses to the complete mastery and internalization of these artificial behaviors:

*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. (Okara 25–32)

The repeated use of "I have learned" highlights the pressure and the structural dynamics which force the person to do what he or she has avoided because of his or her aversion. The speaker echoes the hollow actions in Stanzas 1 and 2: "laughing only with my teeth" and "shaking hands without my heart."

The stanza shows the use of antithetical pairing for a linguistic duplicity:

"Goodbye" said when wishing "good-riddance."

Facing someone and saying "Glad to meet you" without any emotion.

Saying it's been nice talking to you when you are currently feeling very bored.

These linguistic divisions are good examples of what Hochschild calls "surface acting"—the pretending of feelings on the outside without changing them on the inside. The speaker suffers from moral conundrum and cognitive dissonance (Festinger): he is aware that his everyday speech is composed of systematic lies and at the same time he strives to keep a social harmony. The False Self has become more than a selective defense, it has become a behavioral script—a totalizing internal alienation (Seeman; Fromm).

Stanza Six: The Mirror Horror and the Urge to Unlearn

Stanza Six marks an emotional crisis and a decisive turn toward psychological resistance:

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 bare fangs! (Okara 33–39)

The impassioned plea "But believe me, son" signals an urgent desire for catharsis and authentic recognition (Honneth). Recognizing his own corruption, the speaker seeks to break free from socialized artificiality and return to an uncorrupted state represented by his child ("when I was like you").

The phrase "unlearn all these muting things" is critically significant. Socialization is identified as a force that "mutes" or suffocates authentic emotional expression. As Azuonye notes, "muting" encapsulates both postcolonial cultural suppression and the psychological silencing of the individual (8). The speaker recognizes that relearning authenticity requires an active dismantling

of acquired defenses.

The culmination of this self-alienation is captured in the terrifying mirror image: "my laugh in the mirror / shows only my teeth like a snake's bare fangs!" The mirror, traditionally a locus of self-encounter and Lacanian identity reflection (Lacan), returns an image of monstrous alterity. The simile comparing teeth to "a snake's bare fangs" evokes predatory danger, deceit, and moral toxicity. The speaker does not see a warm human being; he sees a cold, dangerous predator. This mirror moment represents a classic Winnicottian crisis: the False Self has become so dominant that the individual experiences horror at his own depersonalization (Winnicott 148; Laing). The shock of seeing his smile transformed into "fangs" catalyzes the speaker's desperate attempt to reclaim his True Self.

Stanza Seven: Reversal of Pedagogy and the Quest for Recovery

The final stanza establishes a radical structural and pedagogical reversal:

*So show me, son,
how to laugh; show me how
I used to laugh and smile
once upon a time when I was like you. (Okara 40–43)*

The traditional male/female relationship (father-son) is reversed, and the father teaches the son how to live in the world (Azuonye 9). The father realizes that the only good thing to be gained from the adult world of socialization is corruption, and the child has an uninhibited spontaneity that is characteristic of the True Self (Winnicott 143; Rousseau). The imperative, "show me, son" positions the child as a moral and psychological guide to the listener.

The "show me" is repeated to indicate how deeply the speaker has lost his ability to feel his emotions, having lived for years in the False Self, and is now unable to find true laughter without someone else's help. The poem is cyclical, with the repeated opening phrase "once upon a time", forming a structure of an envelope (Azuonye 9). The circularity leaves the conclusion open, ambivalent (Bloom). Although the speaker is desperate to return to his own True Self, he has yet to achieve the return to fairytale innocence that is an unfulfilled ideal. It becomes clear in the text that although an adaptive False Self can be identified with and criticized, the process of unlearning deeply ingrained social scripts is a complex and long-term process.

Discussion and Theoretical Synthesis

Gabriel Okara's "Once Upon a Time" presents a comprehensive diagnostic of modern psychological fragmentation. By tracing the speaker's arc across seven stanzas, the poem demonstrates how external social pressures transform human behavior from genuine emotional connection into strategic performance.

Stanza	Dominant Behavioral Pattern	Psychological & Theoretical State
1	Cold eyes, teeth-laughter	Environmental threat & suspicion
2	Pocket-searching handshakes	Economic calculation & transactional self
3	Shut doors, fake invitations	Institutionalized linguistic hypocrisy
4	Plurality of social "faces"	Dramaturgy; construction of False Self
5	Surface acting, polite lies	Moral dissonance & internal alienation
6	Snake fangs in mirror image	Lacanian horror & depersonalization
7	Plea to child to teach laughter	Quest to unlearn; desire for True Self

Combining Winnicott's psychoanalytic approach with sociological and postcolonial theory brings the text of Okara to a multi-layered depth:

1. Postcolonial-Sociological Impingement: Colonial modernity and market capitalism, and urbanization, disrupt traditional communal life of the Africans, leading to a scarcity of resources, competition, and mistrust (Fanon; Achebe; Ngũgĩ). Social interactions are instrumentalized; people have to wear protective masks in this context.

The Defense Mechanism of False Self: When it becomes necessary to be alive in a calculating environment, the individual develops a set of situational masks ("officeface", "cocktailface"). This False Self protects the interiority from environmental harm (Goffman), but also ultimately chokes off spontaneous emotional ability (Hochschild).

Moral Crisis and Alienation: The False Self that is being maintained by the individual is causing an enormous internal conflict. The person's speech, actions and self-image become alienated to him and he becomes an actor in his own life (Fromm; Seeman). The "snake fangs" is an image of the ultimate fear of this state: when protective disguises have seeped into the essence of personality.

4. The Structural Ambiguity of Recovery: Reclaiming the True Self" calls for "unlearning" of socialized compliance. But because adults have to have some functional decorum in their social life, total return to childhood innocence is a dream that is just out of reach. The poem emphasizes the critical first step of consciousness of the False Self in the process of recovering to a true emotional state, but the journey to a fully realized emotional state is a constant challenge, one that is an existential one.

Conclusion

Gabriel Okara's *Once Upon a Time* is a strong indictment on the psychological price of living in the modern world. The poem vividly captures the systematic destruction of emotional authenticity through the strategic use of imagery and dramatic structure, which are deeply driven by fear, distrust and material calculation.

Combining the critical commentary from Dar, Azuonye, and Cholakal with Winnicott's, Goffman's,

and Fanon's theoretical viewpoints, the social masks of the poem emerge not simply as satiric tropes, but as defensive psychological structures. An adaptive False Self is a means by which the postcolonial subject can negotiate and survive in a hostile social environment, but that inevitably results in internal divisions, moral conflicts, and depersonalization.

Finally, the speaker begs his son to "show me how to laugh," a powerful message of human recovery. Through the eyes of the uncorrupted innocence of the child, the text makes the claim that although the social requirement for performance is ubiquitous, the longing for "real" connection and True Self authenticity is a potent and persistent drive in the human psyche.

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